THE SECRET LIFE

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The Secret Life

A Play in Three Acts

by

Harley Granville-Barker

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1919-22

THE SECRET LIFE

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

STEPHEN SEROCOLD.
SIR GEOFFREY SALOMONS.
EVAN STROWDE.
ELEANOR STROWDE.
JOAN WESTBURY.
THE COUNTESS OF PECKHAM.
OLIVER GAUNTLETT.
MR. KITTREDGE.
SUSAN KITTREDGE.
DOROTHY GAUNTLETT.
SIR LESLIE HERIOT.
A PARLOURMAID.
LORD CLUMBERMERE.

The first Act takes place at a seaside cottage in August; the second at Braxted Abbey, in the following June; the third in London and at Countesbury, Massachusetts, in the March following that.

ACT I

SCENE I

A house that faces the sea ; the salted turf runs up to its white, rough-cast walls. This one is cut through in the middle by steps that lead up five feet or so to a loggia which opens on one side to the sitting-room, on the other to the dining-room. On the grass, at each side of the steps, a seat stands against the wall. But as it is a warm summer night, and as the rooms are small, the loggia, which is itself as large as a room, is being used as one. A piano has even been run out of the window ; and around it are gathered four or five people. They cannot be seen unless they stand up, the parapet that bounds the loggia prevents this. But their voices can be plainly heard, and one of the party—a man—is coming to the end of a curious, half-sung, half-spoken performance of ' Tristan and Isolde.' He accompanies himself on the piano. He proceeds in English when it happens to fit the music, when it doesn't he relapses incongruously into the German. On the white steps sits a solitary figure in white ; Joan Westbury.

STEPHEN SEROCOLD'S VOICE. . . . weherndern all ! And sinking . . . be drinking . . . unbewusst . . . hochste Lust ! Uplifted, transfigured, Isolde sinks into

Brangaene's arms. Hush! Her spirit is passing. The faithful Brangaene relaxes her hold of the lifeless body. . . .

THE VOICE OF SIR GEOFFREY SALOMONS. Always an awkward moment!

SEROCOLD. Shut up! Awestruck in death's presence the rough soldiers stand motionless.

EVAN STROWDE'S VOICE. Their hard eyes fill with tears.

SEROCOLD (*protesting violently through the harmonies*). No!

STROWDE. You used to fill them with tears.

SEROCOLD. Never! King Mark, stern and noble, calm without though inwardly shaken. . . .

STROWDE. Wagner always must be flattering that sort of man.

SALOMONS. Every one does.

SEROCOLD (*drowning them with voice and piano both*). . . . raises his hand as if in benediction of the tragic lovers. The twilight deepens. The curtain falls.

He closes with some elaboration. There is, however, no applause; an ironic silence rather. After a moment, Miss Eleanor Strowde's voice is heard, saying . . .

ELEANOR. Thank you.

SEROCOLD. Well . . . not so bad, considering! May I have a drink?

ELEANOR. They'll be in the dining-room, Evan.

Strowde unhurriedly walks across to the dining-room and turns on the light there.

SEROCOLD. Sir Geoffrey Salomons, K.C.B., your performance of King Mark . . . for all that I thumped the notes for you . . . was rotten.

SALOMONS. Time has, I fear, added a patine to my voice.

SEROCOLD. Patina, Sir, et praeterea nihil. And in future I shall address your envelopes K.C.B. flat.

STROWDE (*calling back*). What about my Kurwenal?

SEROCOLD. What, indeed!

SALOMONS. You have been shamelessly practising, Serocold.

SEROCOLD. Certainly . . . I gave half a morning to it. Well . . . Tristan, Isolde, chorus, and orchestra . . . I ask you! Odd . . . Eleanor's note telling me you'd be dining . . . and that very day I'd happened on my old score.

SALOMONS. Which I notice has my name on it.

SEROCOLD. Horrid habit it was of yours . . . writing your name in other people's books. (*He forces a sigh, the mocking sigh of reminiscent middle-age.*) Well, I shall never make that noise again!

STROWDE. Whisky, Stephen?

SEROCOLD. Not much.

SALOMONS. I've been trying to recall our last bout.

SEROCOLD. I came back to Balliol in the spring after Evan got his fellowship.

SALOMONS. I was down by then.

SEROCOLD. You were there.

STROWDE. Soda?

SEROCOLD. Tap.

STROWDE. Same for you, Geoffrey?

SALOMONS. Soda. No whisky.

ELEANOR. The water looks worse than it tastes. But we have to bring every drinkable drop from the village.

SEROCOLD. I suppose one can't sink a well so near the sea.

SALOMONS (*with the slightest touch of orientalism*). But it's a charming place, Miss Strowde.

ELEANOR. For a summer six weeks. Evan likes the bathing. We're getting too old for our long walks.

SALOMONS. And with such weather.

SEROCOLD. It will start to rain next Friday . . . as I change trains at Fayet St. Gervais.

SALOMONS. It will start to pour on Wednesday morning as I leave Perth.

SEROCOLD. You deserve no better . . . keeping us sitting through August over your wretched Tied Industries Bill.

SALOMONS. You should have put your trust in the Permanent Official, and passed the thing in May.

Strowde returning with the drinks, notices the still figure on the steps. He is a man of fifty. Lady Westbury is rather younger. A woman that, in her youth, must have been very flower-like; the fragility, and a sense of fragrance about her, remains.

STROWDE. Is that you, Joan?

JOAN. Yes.

STROWDE. Couldn't you endure it?

JOAN. I could hear perfectly. Look at the moon.

STROWDE. It might be a ship on fire.

JOAN. Burnt out.

ELEANOR'S VOICE. My dear . . . I thought you'd stolen to bed. Don't sit there without something round your shoulders. You're not in Egypt now.

JOAN. The desert's far colder.

ELEANOR. I shall get you a shawl.

JOAN. No, Eleanor.

ELEANOR. And an ugly one . . . as a punishment.

Stephen Serocold now leans over the loggia; a middle-aged man, who has kept his youth.

SEROCOLD. I fear we made a horrid noise.

JOAN. I always come home hungry for music.

SALOMONS. A horrid sight, Serocold!

SEROCOLD. What is?

Sir Geoffrey Salomons joins him. You would know Sir Geoffrey was a Jew; but mainly because he seems a little conscious of the racial difference himself. Irony is his main conversational key.

SALOMONS. Romantic youth . . . dragged from its grave and gibbeted. The three of us used to meet in my rooms at Oxford, Lady Westbury . . . I had the piano, that's why they put up with me . . . to find food for our undergraduate souls. We didn't want to listen to music . . . we wanted to make it. And Tristan was the great dish . . . served as it has just been served to you. And I've known us sit silent for an hour after . . . gorged with emotion.

Strowde, having given Serocold his whisky, asks Joan . . .

STROWDE. Whisky, lemonade, or Eleanor's buttermilk?

JOAN. Nothing, thank you.

SALOMONS. Think . . . if you had but stuck to art and your ideals, my good Serocold, you might now be worth three pounds a week as pianist in a cinema.

SEROCOLD. And a steadier, better-paid job on the balance, it'd be, than my present one.

SALOMONS. You surprise me. I thought you were a venal politician. I have always envied you.

SEROCOLD. No one will bribe me, Salomons . . . no one, at least, has ever tried. Whether that is a compliment to my character, or an estimate of my unimportance . . .! No, my beauty has faded in my country's service . . . late hours in the House are ruinous to the complexion . . . and I've nothing to live on but the money that ought to be spent keeping up the family estate.

Eleanor Strowde comes back with the shawl for Joan. She is grey-haired; a few years older than her brother.

ELEANOR. Put this on.

She wraps it round her with a certain austere tenderness.

JOAN. It's not ugly.

ELEANOR. Not on you.

JOAN (*with finesse*). Thank you . . . and thank you, kind Eleanor.

Sir Geoffrey Salomons grows playfully portentous.

SALOMONS. I take leave, Miss Strowde, to look upon this as a significant occasion. We sit here and celebrate with due mockery our emancipation from the toils of

the wanton art that seduced our youth. Consider us. Serocold is the most popular man in London.

SEROCOLD (*with a flourish*). Shall I deny it? No.

SALOMONS. Why, they tell me that if you didn't light up the lobby with your smile, your poor party couldn't sometimes muster ten votes. I govern England.

JOAN (*repaying him a little irony, in her turn*). All of it, Sir Geoffrey?

SALOMONS. To be accurate, there are about a dozen such sitting in offices, signing papers. We're all the real government England has. She won't stand more. And she'd get rid of us . . . if she knew who we were.

JOAN. And what about you, Evan?

STROWDE. I have left the market-place.

SALOMONS. Truly . . and the dust your feet shook has been laid with our tears.

SEROCOLD. Vexing fellow. Well . . . you're fifty.

STROWDE. I know it. Look at the moon rising. Time on the move! Can you bear the sight of it?

SEROCOLD. Just . . . if I keep busy.

JOAN. And she's dead, poor thing.

STROWDE. A shining nonentity . . . still going on her ordered way.

SEROCOLD. The moral's as plain as the moon is, thank you.

STROWDE. I'm not mocking, Stephen. I envy you your restlessness. My youthful ambition was to do some one thing just as perfectly . . . before I died.

SALOMONS. Did you assume a Lunar life to do it in?

STROWDE. Now, it is not for one of your race, Geoffrey, to gibe at our religious fallacies.

SEROCOLD (*with calculated despair*). Evan, that was a fatal reply. Salomons will now come the Old Testament over us. At Oxford he couldn't open his mouth without boasting he was a Jew. All the evening his ageless almond eye has been silently reminding me that beneath my clothes I am still stained with woad. Salomons, you may lend me money if you like. But if you patronise me . . . I'll have your teeth drawn . . . I will publish a pamphlet proving you to be in a world-conspiracy with Mr. Judas Abramovitch of Moscow . . . I will cut your throat on the Stock Exchange.

STROWDE. Have you really a sense, Geoffrey, that we ultra-Europeans are so different?

SALOMONS. Yes . . . very deep down I feel a stranger among you. But my mentality is now a little like the money you let me learn to master . . . it's a currency. By nature you're all for absolute values, for rooted virtues . . . flourish or perish! You're capable of suicide and murder . . . how seldom a Jew commits either! . . . and of all extremes. I'm for what's marketable.

STROWDE. And no Christian paradoxes!

SALOMONS. But don't you want to see heroism and patriotism and altruism . . . all the kingdom of heaven that's within you . . . turned to some practical account? The marketing of ideals is the trade that matters . . . and there is a world-conspiracy of the people who know it. Join us, Miss Strowde.

ELEANOR. I! Why?

SALOMONS. Then . . . for one thing . . . you wouldn't be so down as you were at dinner on poor Serocold's political morality.

SEROCOLD. My political immorality.

SALOMONS. She will no longer . . . forgive me ! . . . stand helplessly confused between the two.

SEROCOLD. Oh, Evan and Eleanor are like the man with the million pound bank note who starved.

SALOMONS. My dear Serocold, that's not how to deal with idealists. Then they protest that they'll die with dignity. Persuade them it's we who are poor without them.

ELEANOR. We must all cash in our principles, must we ?

SALOMONS. Not for mere cash. Don't misunderstand me. My race and its pupils have mastered a larger technique. I'm not a money-lender nowadays . . . I'm a Civil Servant . . . a damned bureaucrat. If I weren't I'd be a philanthropist. I work with a finer currency than gold.

STROWDE. Stephen wants to buy me back. But I protest there's nothing left of me to sell.

SEROCOLD. Nonsense !

STROWDE. Not one principle.

SEROCOLD. Buy you !

STROWDE. You and I got into Parliament, Stephen, in nineteen hundred and . . . peace time. War time got me out of it. Why ?

SEROCOLD. Why indeed ! I could have patched up the row with Bellingham in ten minutes if I'd been on the spot.

STROWDE. My beliefs proved unworkable. I have no new ones. Geoffrey thinks he knows a lot . . . that suffices him. You strike attitudes. When I hear you talk politics nowadays, Stephen, it's like hearing you sing Tristan.

SEROCOLD. As bad as that.

STROWDE. As incredible. Scratch off our clothes, O survivor of wrecked civilisations, and instead of the savage it's likelier you'll find nothing at all.

SALOMONS. But, my dear good heroic fellow . . . why not be content with appearances? Why risk disillusion? Cultivate morality . . . but not religion. Elaborate your politics. And exalt good manners. The achievement in a hundred thousand years or so of the gentleman, the lady, and the leisure class with appetites turned to taste, is a most important one. Don't let democratic cant belittle that. Indulge yourselves, incidentally, in a little art . . . a few good tunes, a picture or so, a scene full of pretty girls. Provide such things . . . for now that the human brute is well fed, his passions need distracting . . .

STROWDE. And a little alcohol.

SALOMONS. Yes, if you can't be sentimental without it. But never be carried off on crusades you can't finance . . . don't overdraw on your moral credit. Don't, for one moment, let art and religion and patriotism persuade you that you mean more than you do. Stand by Jerusalem when it comes to stoning the prophets. I must be off.

ELEANOR. Before you're answered.

SALOMONS. Answers are echoes.

ELEANOR. What does that mean ?

SEROCOLD. It means that we all talk the same nonsense and all have to do the next thing there is to be done.

SALOMONS. But thank you for a charming evening.

ELEANOR. Till October.

SALOMONS. The Committee is to meet on the fifteenth. But you'll get your summons.

ELEANOR. My first full-fledged official committee. I feel cock-a-hoop.

A skittish phrase for Eleanor. Serocold goes back to the piano to strum delicately and sing little snatches. 'Tristan,' 'Isolde.'

SALOMONS. Good-bye, Lady Westbury. Once more, my condolences upon the catastrophe. But I must not agree that insurance is a mockery.

ELEANOR. Be thankful you weren't burnt in your bed.

JOAN. My first fire ! It's inspiriting to have to start life again in one's dressing-gown and the gardener's boots.

STROWDE. Your car's round here, Geoffrey.

SALOMONS. Good-night, Serocold.

Serocold sings to the melody of the Liebestod . . .

SEROCOLD. Good-night, Sir Geoffrey . . . Salomons K.C.B. flat . . . hidden handed bureaucrat . . . Beast in Revelations . . . your number will shortly be up.

SALOMONS. Not going abroad ?

STROWDE. I've no impulse to. Europe still reproaches one. Perhaps . . . in the winter.

SALOMONS. If Serocold don't recapture you.

They have gone down the steps and away round the house, Strowde kindling a pocket torch. The two women lean together on the parapet.

JOAN. You've never been to Karnak, Eleanor ?

ELEANOR. No.

JOAN. We break our journey at Luxor whenever there's time. You should stand on the great gate and watch the moon rising over the Nile . . . and then think of all the armies that have marched . . .

ELEANOR (*touching her hand*). My child, you're as cold as a toad. Cheer up ! Mark'll be home for good next year . . . and think of the fun you'll have re-building.

JOAN (*with a rather wan smile*). Energetic Eleanor ! But as if he hadn't enough to worry him in Cairo at this moment.

ELEANOR (*the kindly scold*). You go to bed now.

SEROCOLD (*as he softly strums*). How many more volumes to this infernal history that Evan has found refuge in ?

ELEANOR. One to publish . . . one to write.

SEROCOLD. How long'll that take you ?

ELEANOR. I don't know.

SEROCOLD. Can't you finish it for him, Eleanor ?

ELEANOR. Hardly.

SEROCOLD (*pleasantly ironic*). Books must be written, I admit . . . but there are lots of men fit for nothing else. We philistine politicians may be a poor lot . . . but we do get things done.

JOAN (*half to herself, as she leans on the parapet*). I must pray now to the moon . . . as one burnt-out lady to another . . . to teach me to order my ways.

Serocold breaks into song again; from the second act this time.

SEROCOLD. Oh rest upon us . . . night du Liebe.

JOAN. Burnt out inside . . . the moon is. Gutted . . . such an ugly word!

SEROCOLD (*singing away*). Give forgetting . . . that I live. Take me out . . . in deinen schoss. . . .

Eleanor has gone into the sitting-room. Joan stares out to sea.

SCENE II

It is morning, and the sun is shining. Eleanor, wrapped in a fur coat, is sitting in the loggia, writing. Serocold, dressed for his journey, comes out of the house and stands by the head of the steps talking to her.

SEROCOLD. Good morning, ma'am.

ELEANOR. Has the car come ?

SEROCOLD. Not yet, I think.

ELEANOR. There's ample time. It's to pick up Joan at the Cottage Hospital.

SEROCOLD. I'm interrupting ?

ELEANOR. No, I've just finished.

SEROCOLD. Proofs ?

ELEANOR. Pages one to sixty . . . volume four . . . of the infernal history.

SEROCOLD. We've been in for a swim. I left Evan basking. Are you cold ?

ELEANOR. No. I work in a fur coat all the year round. Thin blood . . . old age !

SEROCOLD. Intellectual passion, Eleanor . . . chilling but admirable. Am I to post these in London ?

ELEANOR. I'm coming up with you . . . for the day.

SEROCOLD. My dear! Eighty miles up and eighty miles down at eighty in the shade.

ELEANOR. I'm going to lunch at Kate Gossett's to meet Lord Clumbermere.

SEROCOLD (*with much meaning in the exclamation*). Oh! And what does Kate want with him?

ELEANOR. I want fifty thousand pounds out of him for the Institute of Social Service.

SEROCOLD. Well . . . I daresay you'll get it.

ELEANOR. I'm told he's a good little man.

SEROCOLD. He's good for that much.

ELEANOR (*pointedly*). You should know.

SEROCOLD (*bland*). I assure you, we got nothing for his peerage. Reward of merit! I did hope he'd be substantially grateful. But divil a threepenny bit!

ELEANOR. He bought his baronetcy surely.

SEROCOLD (*bitter-sweet*). Ah . . . Egerton gave him that. (*He looks back towards the house, and lifts his voice a little.*) Good morning, fair lady!

ELEANOR. I hope the taxi-man didn't hurry you. How's Lester?

Joan, to whom this has been spoken, comes from the sitting-room, and speaks first to Eleanor, then to Stephen Serocold.

JOAN. She had a good night. My heroic maid who went back for my pearls.

SEROCOLD. Her point of honour.

ELEANOR. She didn't get them.

JOAN. I'm almost glad she didn't. Pearls at that price! (*To Eleanor*) You saw her arm.

ELEANOR. Rather perverse of you!

JOAN. Is it? Yes, Lester would think so. We discuss now what we'll do with the insurance money. She's to decide!

She goes back into the house; a moment later comes out again with a parasol, goes down the steps and sits on one of the benches there silently. Eleanor being now quite free of her writing table, Serocold fixes her.

SEROCOLD. You may take it from me, Eleanor, that the pro-Leaguers will vote against Egerton on the Japanese question . . . and he'll resign . . . and Bellingham must be sent for. He can form a government even without dissolving. And I'll lay you five to two that it all comes off before Christmas.

She lets him finish; then she shakes her head with a half smile.

ELEANOR. I'm not interested, Stephen.

SEROCOLD. You definitely refuse to help shepherd Evan back to the fold.

ELEANOR. Yes. I'm sorry your week-end has been wasted.

SEROCOLD. I've enjoyed myself! Don't be nasty.

ELEANOR. If Evan chooses to go back into politics he will, whatever I say.

SEROCOLD. And of course he will . . . it's the obvious thing to do. But why drift back?

ELEANOR. If he ever serves under Mr. Bellingham again . . . I shall be surprised.

SEROCOLD. You must serve under the man who's there! Bellingham has his failings . . . and his wife's a disaster.

ELEANOR. I don't call Mrs. Bellingham a disaster.

SEROCOLD. She's so dull.

ELEANOR (*beyond indignation even*). My objection to your respected chief is simply that he's a liar.

SEROCOLD. I shouldn't call him a liar.

ELEANOR. . . . that he's a trickster.

SEROCOLD. He can be tricky when he's driven to it.

ELEANOR. He has no principles.

SEROCOLD (*cheerily*). I tell him that. But he says that his answer is Emerson's . . .

ELEANOR. It would be !

SEROCOLD. That a foolish consistency is the bugbear of little minds.

ELEANOR. Well . . . he is consistently disloyal to his friends.

SEROCOLD (*with just a little heat added to the lightness*). No, Eleanor, there you're wrong. And it hurts him when they say the sort of things about him that you're saying. But how can he go on working with them afterwards ?

ELEANOR (*very directly*). Would you tolerate a tithe of his dishonesty in your own lawyer ?

SEROCOLD (*changing ground with the utmost grace*). Ah . . . that opens a wide question. I want an honest lawyer. I've got one, I think . . . and I do my best to deserve him. But isn't Bellingham the sort of Prime Minister that our dear public want ?

ELEANOR. Then let the people of England cultivate political intelligence.

SEROCOLD. And what's to happen meanwhile ? After all, we're responsible.

ELEANOR. Who are we ?

SEROCOLD. The governing classes.

ELEANOR. Who are they ?

SEROCOLD (*with a candour that quite obliterates irony, should there by chance be any at the very bottom of his mind*). Nowadays . . . the people of goodwill and energy . . . wherever they spring from . . . who'll trouble to learn the tricks of the trade. I'm a good democrat. I'll work with any one who'll work with me. And I say that the great thing is to keep things going . . . to make for righteousness somehow . . . by the line of least resistance.

ELEANOR (*the moralist*). You've all deteriorated since the war.

SEROCOLD. And what sort of a morality's yours, may I ask . . . truckling to Clumbermere for money ? Travelling up to London to do it, too !

ELEANOR (*the realist*). I offer Lord Clumbermere social salvation . . . cheap at the price. I've nothing else to sell him. We must start. Have I got a hat on ? Joan, dear, forgive my deserting you. Be nice to Evan. I'll be back to dinner . . .

SEROCOLD. With fifty thousand honest sovereigns jingling in your pocket !

ELEANOR. You'll find me in the car . . . in two minutes.

Eleanor goes into the house. Serocold comes down a few steps and leans against the wall within a good range of Joan.

SEROCOLD. We physicians of the body politic, you'll observe . . . of whatever school . . . are at one in our firm faith in bleeding.

JOAN. Who is Lord Clumbermere . . . ought I to know?

SEROCOLD. Tanner's Inks he was. God knows what else now . . . now that he himself is appropriately de-personalised into Clumbermere. An able devil.

JOAN. You want Evan back.

SEROCOLD. Bellingham wants to make it up with him. But he must hold out a hand.

JOAN. Was he trying to work with?

SEROCOLD. Infinitely.

JOAN. But you keep on trying!

SEROCOLD. It's my job. And the party's so loaded up nowadays with axe-grinders of all sorts . . .

JOAN. D'you think Eleanor's is the right woman's way into politics?

SEROCOLD. I don't like women in public affairs, I'm afraid . . . though it's too unpopular a thing to say. They make bad worse . . . not better.

JOAN. Her Institute and her Guilds.

SEROCOLD. They're nice new toys.

JOAN. And Sir Geoffrey's Committee! She thinks you'll soon be left chattering in your clubs.

SEROCOLD. She has been devilling for Evan all her life. She's sick of it . . . that's all.

JOAN. You miss Mary.

SEROCOLD. Damnably.

JOAN. I'm so glad I was home that summer and saw her before she died.

SEROCOLD. She was very fond of you.

JOAN. Life's eddies are so strange. Evan and

Eleanor take this cottage for August . . . I'm burnt out of house and home, and cast on their mercy.

SEROCOLD. And do you remember our first meeting ?

JOAN. Shamelessly . . . no.

SEROCOLD. Evan and Eleanor, Mary and I, you and your husband . . . emptied together from various trains on the platform at Verona.

JOAN. Oh yes . . . I was on my honeymoon.

SEROCOLD. I had a vision of it this morning . . . as I floated on the sea. And of the man with the guitar who offered to pass the time for us by singing 'Rigoletto' right through for three lire. My Tristan fooleries must have reminded me. And our last meeting ?

JOAN. Such is the blank I call my mind . . . !

SEROCOLD. Tea at the Military Tournament . . . nineteen thirteen. Your boy was with you.

JOAN. Which ?

SEROCOLD. The one that was killed.

JOAN. They were both killed.

SEROCOLD. Both !

JOAN. Within a month.

SEROCOLD (*there being nothing better to say*). I forgot. I won't blunder further by saying sympathetic things. I fear I used sometimes, rather meanly, to thank God Mary had no children. Then I lost her.

JOAN (*detaching her mind*). I was once taken through Vickers's to see the armour-plate making . . . and the big steam hammer cracked a nut for my benefit. They gave me the nut, and told me just where to place it. Mighty goings on leave us, don't you think, almost

too dazed to complain? Won't Eleanor be waiting for you?

SEROCOLD. Heavens . . . yes. Good-bye.

JOAN. Good-bye.

SEROCOLD. Come and see Braxted again some day?

JOAN. I'd like to.

He goes into the house and so away. Joan sits looking out to sea. After a moment Strowde, in a bathing-suit covered by a voluminous dressing-gown, comes as if from the beach. Joan, motionless, is aware of him.

JOAN. Good morning.

STROWDE. Did you sleep?

JOAN. Yes.

STROWDE. The night through?

JOAN. Oh no!

STROWDE. For how long?

JOAN. Three hours. Don't give me away.

STROWDE. I'll give you till Wednesday to get a night's rest. Then I'll tell on you.

JOAN. I don't want to be doctored. I'm having such a peaceful time.

STROWDE. Eleanor gone?

JOAN. With Stephen Serocold.

STROWDE (*his tone changing just a little*) We've a day together.

JOAN (*not indifferently*). Yes.

STROWDE. Our first for a while.

JOAN. For a long while. You're to go back into Parliament, please, Evan, and into the Cabinet . . . at once.

STROWDE. The voice of Stephen !

JOAN. Why don't you ?

STROWDE. I must dress. Then I'll tell you.

JOAN. Don't you believe in yourself any longer ?

STROWDE. Is that enough of a faith ?

JOAN. Its revenges are simple.

STROWDE. I've been clearing out the wardrobe of my mind lately. I used to have quite a fashionable mind. I find worn-out stuff and stuff I've never worn. And one can't get rid of it. It mocks me from the rubbish heap.

JOAN. Better be burnt out.

STROWDE. Yes . . . you're lucky.

JOAN. I do feel, though, that one cannot start in collecting again. Let God's eye behold me still in my dressing-gown and the gardener's boots.

STROWDE. Shall we lunch out here ? It won't be too hot. The parlourmaid's eye not being as God's, I will shift to a less symbolical attire. I want to talk to you, Joan.

JOAN. Well . . . we'll talk.

He goes in to dress. She does not move. She is, indeed, of a very still habit.

SCENE III

It is nearly midnight, and the moon is shining. Joan, wrapped from the chill in a white cloak, is sitting on the steps as before. Strowde comes out of the house.

JOAN. What had happened? Is she very tired?

STROWDE. She hasn't come. He drove here to tell me.

JOAN. But it's the last train.

STROWDE. No . . . I've sent him to the Junction now. There's a nine-thirty express she might have caught.

JOAN. And if not?

STROWDE. She could motor forty miles and get here about three in the morning.

JOAN. Couldn't she have telegraphed?

STROWDE. Yes . . . up to seven.

JOAN. Not like Eleanor.

STROWDE. I'm sorry. Will you wait up?

JOAN. I think so . . . a little longer.

STROWDE. She'll come.

JOAN. Is she still rifling Lord What's his name's pockets . . . while Kate Gossett holds him down? The silly man must have been struggling.

STROWDE. Clumbermere's his name . . . if you ever want to thank him for our day together.

By this they have settled themselves to wait.

JOAN. A long day, Evan.

STROWDE. Has it seemed so ?

JOAN. Eighteen years long. (*A silence ; then she says, as if released from the spell of time*) How easy to talk to you, though . . . surprisingly !

STROWDE (*wholesomely matter-of-fact*). No . . . we've had something to say . . . and haven't had to repeat ourselves . . . as we'd have done talking day in and day out. . . .

JOAN (*yielding again for a moment to the spell*). For eighteen years. (*Then again shaking free*) I believe I've told you everything. You've not told me much.

STROWDE. Several anecdotes. Do you want more ? I've a good memory. Sometimes I exercise it to see if the anecdotes strung together have any meaning.

JOAN. Ought I to be ashamed to have so little to tell ? No spiritual adventures. Housekeeping in odd corners of the world . . . a husband and two children.

STROWDE. Dutiful happiness.

JOAN. Yes.

STROWDE. As we agreed then . . . all for the best.

JOAN. I've never doubted it.

STROWDE (*his tone sharpening a little ; the edge towards himself, though*). But when people say that, they're apt to mean . . . all for the second best, aren't they ?

JOAN (*countering with irony*). And that's not worth clinging to . . . in these hard times ?

STROWDE. It has also been said, Joan, that Second Best is what the Devil relies on to keep this world his own.

There is a silence before she asks, as of things long past . . .

JOAN. Was it God tempted us then?

STROWDE. God's the great tempter. But . . . even as you now understand what you then were . . . you did love me?

JOAN. Yes.

STROWDE. And you've never doubted that either?

JOAN. Never.

STROWDE. Though the love for Mark survived. And you had your boys.

JOAN (*as making final confession*). I couldn't have lived my love for you, Evan . . . it would have killed me.

STROWDE. Did I understand that? (*He is disposed to laugh.*) It's always hard to believe that a little human happiness will hurt one.

JOAN. I think some power in me would always have kept me from you . . . some innermost power.

STROWDE. I'd have put up a fight with it. I can be less of an altruist . . . than I was then.

JOAN. But what would you have brought to surrender? Nothing you loved. Nothing that loved you. (*Now she joins him in protective mockery.*) It's shocking for a woman to discover that wifehood and motherhood are really best carried through as matters of business . . . but if she loves a man she can only make him miserable.

STROWDE. I'd be glad enough to be made unhappy once again.

JOAN (*with a touch of mischief*). Has no one managed it in these eighteen years? No, no . . . I'm not curious.

Strowde faces her, and asks very seriously, but almost disinterestedly . . .

STROWDE. Then, in the sense that you've always loved me . . . do you love me still?

JOAN. Yes.

STROWDE. Oh . . . why not!

JOAN. I keep it a secret from my everyday self. But . . . I love you.

STROWDE. Well, it's a word of all work, isn't it? . . . and we wear out its meanings one by one, as we fulfil and prove them . . . or as we fail to.

JOAN. Perhaps, Evan . . . for a last meaning . . . to love is to love the unattainable.

He breaks the tension.

STROWDE. Still, you've not much to complain of. Mark's a first-rate fellow.

Joan's voice is never hard, nor ever dry, but sometimes it empties of all tone; as now.

JOAN. My boys are gone.

STROWDE. Yes . . . I won't pretend to understand what that means.

JOAN. One's capable, you know, of uncomprehended suffering. I watched women making a sort of emotional profit out of their loss. People called me stoical . . . but it was only that I didn't understand . . . or want to. Why ask what an earthquake's for? My bitterest moment was when I came home to find their kit sent back from France. Burnt up with everything else

now, I'm glad to think. The emptyings, poor dears, of their pockets . . . of a dead boy's pockets!

STROWDE (*setting his teeth to this*). Death leaves us that . . . and life breeds in us fantastic hopes.

JOAN. The night the second news had come we lay awake holding hands. . . . and Mark said suddenly: "I'm sorry, my dear . . . I'm sorry." And I said: "Oh, Mark, don't apologise." We didn't feel very sane.

STROWDE (*his brows knit, but his eyes lifted a little*). Nature wastes life . . . for she can afford to. And our human nature spends loving-kindness . . . and we must afford to. You and he have each other. I'm sure he needs you.

She comes back with relief to practical things.

JOAN. I wish I'd not left him just now . . . but the doctor won't let me stay out the summer there. His work's a failure, he says . . . so they thought they must send him red ribbons and things. When his K.C.B. badge came he threw it into the corner and cursed. It has been a bad three years. We used to fear that you and your party would come in to theorise us out of existence. I remember the evening when he brought the paper to Gizeh with the news of your bye-election majority. "Evan will take three steps into the F.O.," he said . . . "and I shall resign." (*A little grimly*) It's his friends have let him down.

STROWDE. Did he really picture me astraddle before the official mantelpiece with my chest puffed out and: Gentlemen, now I'm in power . . .?

JOAN. But why aren't you, Evan?

He looks at her in silence for a moment.

STROWDE. If I say: Thanks to you . . . don't misunderstand.

JOAN (*puzzled and ready to be hurt for his sake all the same*). Oh, my dear!

STROWDE. But understand I do thank you that I am not a popular political figure to-day . . . putting on all the airs of wisdom.

JOAN. Was your history writing the better choice?

STROWDE. Well, the Industrial History is honestly laboured stuff. You've not read it?

JOAN. Horrid confession . . . no. I began to.

STROWDE. Shamefuller still!

JOAN. Three volumes.

STROWDE. And a fourth to come.

JOAN. And a fifth.

STROWDE. Perhaps. A job almost any one could have done, and nobody did. Shall I tell you why I took it on . . . even before the other job failed me?

JOAN. Why?

STROWDE. This sounds unselfish . . . it wasn't. I really had to find something more than housekeeping for Eleanor to do. My marriage!

JOAN. It's been a happy one?

STROWDE. Quite.

JOAN. Dear Eleanor.

STROWDE. The best of women. And she brings some meaning to that banal praise.

JOAN. What's to happen when the history is finished?

STROWDE (*businesslike*). Eleanor's goodness begins to be accounted wisdom of the current sort. Committees

are seeking her out. Even Salomons, you see, that shrewd appraiser of what's worth while . . .

JOAN. I meant what's to happen to you ?

STROWDE (*with just a touch of irony, not an unkind one, though*). Eleanor, grown a power in the land and backed by much Clumbermere money, may find me employment.

JOAN. Nonsense. When will the last volume be done ?

STROWDE. Ah, that's a question. (*He turns his head suddenly*) I hear the car changing gear on Pewsey Hill.

JOAN. He has been very quick.

STROWDE. Impossibly. She'll have found a taxi at the Junction, and they've met half-way.

JOAN (*her voice taking on more colour*). Evan . . . stir yourself out of this hopelessness and disbelief.

STROWDE (*grimly*). When the donkey's at the end of his tether and has eaten his patch bare, he's to cut capers and kick up a dust, is he ?

JOAN. Have you no purpose left in you ?

STROWDE (*grimly, indeed*). None. Have you ?

JOAN. Second Best has exploited me, you may say, and left me for dead. But I was firmly minded that you'd make for yourself a great career.

STROWDE. How shamefully romantic of you !

JOAN. Don't you want to be a power in the world ?

STROWDE. Save me from the illusion of power ! I once had a glimpse . . . and I thank you for it, my dear . . . of a power that is in me. But that won't answer to any call.

JOAN. Not to the call of a good cause ?

STROWDE (*as one who shakes himself free from the temptations of unreality*). Excellent causes abound. They are served . . . as they are ! . . . by eminent prigs making a fine parade, by little minds watching for what's to happen next. Track such men down . . . past picture-paper privacy, and their servants' knowledge of them. Oh, never mind if they drink a little, if they're foolish over women or sordid about money . . . we won't damn them for their weaknesses. But search for their strength . . which is not to be borrowed or bargained for . . . it must spring from the secret life . . .

JOAN. Yes . . . Yes, I know.

STROWDE. . . . and what is it, as a rule, but the old ignorant savagery ? Nothing to be ashamed of . . . but why deck it with new names ? Women should know, even if we forget, what savages men still are. But you and I climbed together to a chilly height. Was it illusion . . . the truth we found there ?

JOAN. Who am I to say . . . that never put it to the proof ?

STROWDE. Well . . . if we loved the unattainable in each other . . ; and if all we could easily have taken mattered so little besides that we let it go with hardly a murmur . . . why, I've learnt to believe, I suppose, in what's unattainable from life and nothing else can content me or stir me now.

JOAN (*steadily*). It would have been better then if we never had met . . . and never loved.

STROWDE. No . . . that's blasphemy. At least don't join the unbelieving mob who cry: Do something, anything, no matter what . . . do your devilmost . . . all's well while the wheels go round . . . while something's being done! . . . Lord, give us increase . . . if we stop to question, barbarous poverty will overwhelm us again. Are we so few steps upward from the beast that gluts and starves?

JOAN (*with an irony that is irony of the soul*). But seek first the kingdom of God . . . and the desire of all things else shall be taken from you?

STROWDE (*very simply*). It has been taken from me. I don't complain . . . and I don't make a virtue of it. I'm not the first man who has found beliefs that he can't put in his pocket like so much small change. But am I to deny them for that?

JOAN. No . . . one can't.

STROWDE (*choosing his words*). If I could be . . . call it in love again . . . then, perhaps I'd dare stretch out my hand for power.

JOAN. Don't waste time . . . next time . . . over a woman.

STROWDE. I promise you.

She breaks the tension now, and lightens her distress with something like a laugh.

JOAN. I never put such fantastic value on myself. If we'd kissed and parted . . . as we couldn't marry and settle . . .!

STROWDE (*grimly responsive to her tone*). And we never even kissed.

For a little now, they survey this eighteen-year

span, detachedly enough; puzzled, acquiescent, interested.

JOAN. Is life meant to be so serious?

STROWDE. Tell me how to forget you . . . and the meaning of you.

JOAN. I'm changed.

STROWDE. How many times have we met since that cold and desperate parting?

JOAN. A dozen perhaps.

STROWDE (*with a lover's courtesy*). You outface the years very beautifully.

JOAN. Thank you . . . says my vanity.

STROWDE. But such things are tokens for strangers to know you by. What shines for me is the vision of the truth of you which you gave me when you said . . . weighing the words, but not sadly, I remember . . . when you said that you loved me. And that, you see, whatever it may mean, has not changed.

JOAN (*firmly*). I can wish it had never come to your cutting the commonplace earth from under us, Evan, by asking the question. But that was, and it is the truth of me. I'd unsay it if I could.

STROWDE. Yes. We live another life from the beasts only in this tiresome belief that beyond the tokens of our living something we call truth exists. Yet there's nothing near to truth that we learn, but when we've felt the burden we'd cast it away . . . we'd unsay it if we could.

JOAN (*desperately, even with some impatience showing*). But if I'm to stand to you for ever as a symbol of denial . . . of uselessness . . . of a sort of death in life!

Evan, Evan . . . no recording angel will consent to write : He could not be a conquering hero all for thinking of a love affair.

STROWDE. It sounds absurd, doesn't it ?

Her tone changes ; there is pain in it now.

JOAN. Has it been . . . oh, but it can't have been this wintertime with you ever since ? We did wisely.

STROWDE. We did right.

JOAN (*fearlessly probing, for that may help*). No, I don't say so. I did what I felt then I could be sure of doing well.

STROWDE (*putting it to the inscrutable gods*). And we must always try to do more . . . even knowing that we'll fail ! A grim burden for the fledgling soul. Why not make the best of things ?

JOAN (*echoing*). The devil's own second best of things. (*She turns to him again with pain in her voice and eyes.*) You've suffered.

STROWDE (*shrugging*). Why . . . I've had my losses as you have. When the war came my beliefs about men and things were an enemy the more. I fought against them and beat them . . . and they're dead. And what remains ? I'm rather sullen-minded.

JOAN. Is it right to leave present fighting to ignobler minds ?

STROWDE. How can one go in again without purpose or conviction . . . without even ambition or vanity as an excuse . . . remount the merry-go-round ?

JOAN. Yes . . . Mark says the most pitiful thing he meets is the well-meaning man who daren't stop. He sees him, he says, poor dear, in the mirror of a morning.

STROWDE (*with a savage shake of the head*). I'd be an ill-meaning man pretty soon.

JOAN. Why ?

STROWDE. Can you think of a greater driving force for evil than the man who has seen a better way and accepts the worse . . . who knows there's a wisdom that escapes him and must deny it ? I'd sooner trust things to fools, if the fools would take heart, than to disillusioned men.

JOAN. And there's always Eleanor !

STROWDE. Yes, let the busy women have a try at tidying up. But, frankly, I fear they'll make a commonplace world of it.

JOAN. Here she is.

STROWDE. Weary, but cheerful.

JOAN. Bless her !

Strowde goes quickly into the house. After a moment Eleanor comes out. Weary she may be, but she does not show it much. She is subduedly, and a little strangely, cheerful.

ELEANOR. Dear Joan . . . forgive me.

JOAN. Good hunting ?

ELEANOR. Good enough. Has Evan looked after you ?

JOAN. Perfectly.

Strowde returns.

ELEANOR. You didn't get my message. But I missed even that train.

JOAN (*merrily*). You have a callous brother. I said you might be lying cold and stiff. He said it was unlikely.

STROWDE. No one is ever anxious about Eleanor. There are sandwiches and barley-water for you.

ELEANOR. Go to bed, Joan. I didn't dream you'd sit up.

JOAN. Naughty of me. Good-night.

Eleanor kisses her, more tenderly than, one would say, the occasion demanded.

ELEANOR. My dear . . . !

JOAN. I'm sure you've most intriguing things to tell Evan about Lord Bumble-bee . . . or whatever his silly name is. Good-night, Evan.

STROWDE. Good-night, Joan.

She goes. There is a little pause, as if they were waiting for her to get out of earshot.

STROWDE. Well, what's wrong ?

ELEANOR. Mark Westbury fell down dead in his office in Cairo this morning.

STROWDE. Good God !

ELEANOR. By pure chance I met Neville Hamerton at the corner of Whitehall, and he told me. So I went back with him to the F.O. to stop them sending her a telegram. That's what kept me, of course. Shall I tell her to-night or not ?

STROWDE. Yes, I should.

ELEANOR. Would she take it better from you ?

STROWDE (*almost sharply*). Why should she ?

ELEANOR (*with a hint of evasion*). You knew Mark very well.

STROWDE (*concluding this small excursion*). Not better than you know her.

ELEANOR. It'll seem like the end of the world. Both her boys . . . the house burnt down . . . and now this.

STROWDE (*taking to abstractions, as his wont is*) Mark is an immeasurable loss. But all losses are . . . till one measures them by forgetting them.

ELEANOR. They only had each other.

STROWDE. The breaking of a last link brings relief with it too.

ELEANOR (*her brows knitting*). Evan, don't be so callous.

STROWDE (*reasonably*). I am not. It will be a great shock . . . and a great grief . . . till Nature rebels and says : Die of it, or get over it.

ELEANOR. Is this how I'm to talk to Joan ?

STROWDE. Don't start talking at all. Tell her Mark's dead, kiss her, and come away the moment she loosens your hand.

Eleanor faces her mission with misgiving, as well she may.

ELEANOR. Well . . . I'll go up now. Lord Clumbermere was very sound. I think he'll give us thirty thousand.

This last inappropriate remark by no means shows an unsympathetic mind. The thought was there, and she found some support in it. Strowde, though, is not unconscious of the effect of its simple utterance.

STROWDE. Good. Shall I take the sandwiches to your room ?

ELEANOR. No, thank you . . . I'm not hungry.

Eleanor goes into the house. He now has but to put out the lights below, lock up and go to bed.

ACT II

SCENE I

Braxted Abbey, Stephen Serocold's home, is a Tudor house, built on monastic foundations. It has, on the first floor above ground, a long panelled gallery with six high embrasured windows, which overlook the broad terrace. Here is the end of the gallery, and we face the last of these windows, through which we can see the cypresses that border the terrace, and the sky. Set out from the blank wall on our left is a writing-table; sitting at it one can command the gallery's length. A small door in the panelling cuts off the corner; it opens to a small turret staircase which descends but does not ascend. The window is open, for it is a summer afternoon. On the window seat are Serocold and Lady Peckham. She is a woman over fifty, of pronounced vitality, if somewhat insensitive. By the way she is dressed she has just arrived. She is chattering.

LADY PECKHAM. . . . He never forgave me for ruffling his hair once at a supper party at Frankie Turnour's. I told that silly scared girl he married that she'd better learn to. But I think she prefers him pompous. He has gone very bald, though, lately.

SEROCOLD. He works hard. Bellingham gets on with him. He ballasts the Cabinet. God knows we need that.

LADY PECKHAM (*nodding towards the garden*). Where did Joan Westbury spring from? I've not met her for an age.

SEROCOLD. She's been about.

LADY PECKHAM. You brought Evan and Eleanor down with you?

SEROCOLD. Yesterday

LADY PECKHAM. Who else is coming?

SEROCOLD. The Kittredges.

LADY PECKHAM. I've seen them.

SEROCOLD. We only hold eight these days.

LADY PECKHAM. Lunching to-morrow?

SEROCOLD. Bellingham.

LADY PECKHAM (*cocking her head*). You stick to your point, don't you?

SEROCOLD. No, never . . . but I keep on coming back to it.

LADY PECKHAM. He hates Evan.

SEROCOLD (*cheerfully*). Evan despises him. But I'll make it a match.

LADY PECKHAM (*her gaze on the garden again*). And are those two going to?

SEROCOLD. I haven't heard so. But they're walking nicely in step. It looks connubial.

LADY PECKHAM. How long has Mark Westbury been dead?

SEROCOLD. He died in August. This is only June.

LADY PECKHAM. They'd better hurry up. They're

not getting younger. She'll want more children. And why not ?

SEROCOLD (*with mild idealism*). My dear Mildred . . . there are other objects in marrying.

LADY PECKHAM. That's an obvious one. Why do you ask these Kittredges ?

SEROCOLD. I like them . . . and it's as well to be civil to Americans.

LADY PECKHAM. Are they rich ?

SEROCOLD. I'm sure they'd hate to be thought so.

LADY PECKHAM. That's very morbid. Who is it with Evan and Joan.

SEROCOLD. Why, Oliver !

LADY PECKHAM. Heavens . . . I must get new spectacles. You've no right to look so young, you know, Stephen. I wasn't out of the nursery when you were born.

SEROCOLD. Mildred, I believe I may live to be a hundred. It's terrible. . . .

From some way along the terrace below, Oliver Gauntlett's voice is heard calling " Hullo, darling Mother ! " Lady Peckham waves a hand to him.

LADY PECKHAM. Bless you, my son.

SEROCOLD. Things bore me and never tire me. I'm no real good to this government . . . but, honestly, I don't think Bellingham could get on without me. I'm happy down here. All the years Mary was ill I got into the habit of leaving myself with her on the Monday morning and she'd hand it me back well cared for on the Friday night.

LADY PECKHAM. Poor Stephen!

SEROCOLD. You never could stand a sick-bed, could you?

LADY PECKHAM. Stand by one, d'you mean? Not for long.

SEROCOLD. We had more of a married life, though, than most people.

LADY PECKHAM. You're good right through, Stephen.

SEROCOLD. I'm harmless. (*Now he broaches something which it would seem has been on his mind*) I'm pretty vexed, Mildred, about this escapade of Oliver's.

LADY PECKHAM. Nothing in it.

SEROCOLD. Why go to an Anarchist meeting? And if you must go, why in God's name get arrested there!

LADY PECKHAM. They didn't charge him with anything.

SEROCOLD. Every paper had a paragraph.

LADY PECKHAM. A fortnight ago . . . all forgotten. The tradition of the English gentleman, Stephen, is that he may go where he pleases and do what he likes.

SEROCOLD. No doubt. But England's so full of gentlemen now . . . competition has abolished these privileges. Talk to him seriously.

LADY PECKHAM. Try it yourself.

SEROCOLD. I have.

LADY PECKHAM. Well?

SEROCOLD. He says Anarchy interests him.

LADY PECKHAM. Why shouldn't it?

SEROCOLD. My dear Mildred, I'm in the Cabinet, and I'm his uncle.

LADY PECKHAM. That's not his fault.

SEROCOLD. That's what he said. I think it most courageous and forgiving of me to ask him down here.

LADY PECKHAM. It is.

By this it is evident that Joan, Strowde, and Oliver Gauntlett have arrived under the window; and one can talk from the gallery to the terrace with perfect ease.

LADY PECKHAM. How are you, Joan?

JOAN'S VOICE. Do you want to know?

LADY PECKHAM. I ask.

JOAN. I feel like flying.

SEROCOLD. Door's locked inside. I'll open it.

He goes down the turret stair. The exchange of compliments proceeds.

LADY PECKHAM. Hot?

JOAN. No.

LADY PECKHAM. Pretty frock.

JOAN. One I had dyed.

LADY PECKHAM. You're losing a comb.

JOAN. Thank you. When did you get here?

LADY PECKHAM. About six.

JOAN. How's London?

LADY PECKHAM. Horrid.

Oliver Gauntlett comes in by the turret door. He is a young man, and he has lost an arm. Strowde follows him. He carries a printed paper that has an official look about it. This he opens in a minute, and sets himself to at the writing-table. Oliver kisses his mother with real affection.

OLIVER. Where's Dolly?

LADY PECKHAM. Went down to the lake with Miss Susan Kittredge. Well, Evan ?

STROWDE. Well, Mildred ?

No greeting could be friendlier.

OLIVER. You look very handsome, Mother.

LADY PECKHAM. Thank you kindly. How are you ?

OLIVER. Kicking. Evan won't take me on.

LADY PECKHAM. Why should he ?

SEROCOLD'S VOICE. Mildred, come and see the Alderney bull.

LADY PECKHAM. Now ?

SEROCOLD. Yes.

LADY PECKHAM. All right.

OLIVER (*hailing*). Uncle Stephen !

SEROCOLD'S VOICE. Hullo.

OLIVER. I positively was not drunk.

SEROCOLD. I wish you had been.

STROWDE (*looking up from his reading*). Distressing to the nice-minded historian . . . to note how aggressively moral revolutionaries become.

OLIVER. New Year before last at Blair I tried to get drunk and couldn't. Nor wine nor spirits has passed my lips since. I think I'll try again.

LADY PECKHAM. Do you feel you really must ?

OLIVER. Why did you give me such a queer head ?

LADY PECKHAM (*as she kisses the top of it in farewell*). I sometimes wish it had been an even thicker one.

OLIVER. But what about my future ?

STROWDE. Did the worthy Sir Charles Phillips positively throw you down the office steps ?

OLIVER. He wept over me. I resigned.

LADY PECKHAM. I shall shortly have the pleasure of telling that gentleman publicly that he's a liar.

OLIVER. For saying I was frolicsomely drunk! Dear Mother, he meant that kindly.

LADY PECKHAM. Still, I shall not deny myself the pleasure.

Lady Peckham passes down the gallery.

OLIVER. Grin through a mask and explode an idea on them . . . and your Phillipses show the white scuts of their minds like rabbits.

STROWDE. What precise shade of red are you? Anarchy's black, by the way.

OLIVER. Evan, I will tell you a secret. I was down there searching for a Chinese debating society . . . and I got into the wrong meeting.

STROWDE. Did the Bobbies frog-march you?

OLIVER. Well, I'm glad they didn't give me a chance of going back on the poor scared devils. But I had to get quit of old Phillips. So I worked up Bakunin, and had a fine set-to with him.

STROWDE. What's wrong with the City?

OLIVER. What's wrong with a mine that's on a map and a cotton-field on a balance-sheet?

STROWDE. Not primitive enough?

OLIVER. Maybe. Digging potatoes might sweat all the nonsense out of me, d'you think? But I can't.

STROWDE. You play an amazing game of tennis, though.

OLIVER. I write a better hand than I did. It's harder to.

STROWDE. I don't see what use I can be. If politics

are your game . . . won't you do better attacking the citadel of the constitution from within . . . as you happen to have the entrée ?

OLIVER. Yes . . . the Right Honourable Brooke Bellingham's lunching to-morrow. I might wag my tail at him and be a Cabinet Minister in no time.

STROWDE. Why not ?

OLIVER. There's a longer lease for the old gang in letting the youngsters in than in keeping them out, isn't there ? I'm not for bombs. There's not enough difference between a dead Bellingham and a live one.

STROWDE. And there's something to be said, you know, for simple and vulgar ambition.

OLIVER. They're all twitteringly afraid of you, Evan. If your name comes up at a dinner-table, Uncle Stephen gets that genial . . . !

STROWDE. They flatter me.

OLIVER. You're going to stand again at the Election ?

STROWDE. I may.

OLIVER. They think you mean to give them hell.

STROWDE. I must manage to keep up the impression.

OLIVER. I want to learn what's what. I've chucked a success in the City.

STROWDE. You could have given them hell there. A spectacular bankruptcy. You've a name to discredit. That's real revolution.

OLIVER. You're spoiling for a fight, you know . . . for all you sit there writing niggling notes on that report of Eleanor's damned Committee.

STROWDE. I'd be setting you to type them.

OLIVER. I will . . . till the time comes

STROWDE. And if the time never comes?

OLIVER. How long have you believed that?

STROWDE. It is my firm disbelief.

OLIVER. Then why don't you shoot yourself?

STROWDE. I must finish these notes.

OLIVER. I must dress.

STROWDE. Dinner at eight?

OLIVER. It takes me half an hour. But you might think me over.

STROWDE. Yes, I will.

OLIVER. Thank you.

Oliver goes down the gallery, leaving Strowde to his note-making.

SCENE II

Half an hour later. Strowde has nearly reached the end of the Report and of his notes on it. Lady Peckham comes down the gallery.

LADY PECKHAM. You'll be late for dinner.

STROWDE. No.

LADY PECKHAM. You will. Because I want to talk to you.

And she sits on the other side of the writing-table.

STROWDE. What about ?

LADY PECKHAM. Oliver.

STROWDE (*with more than a casual acquiescence*). Yes. What do you want me to do ?

LADY PECKHAM. Queer his turning to you . . . so instinctively.

STROWDE. How long since he turned fantastically minded ? I've hardly seen him since he grew up.

LADY PECKHAM. He has been very mum with me this last year or two.

STROWDE. Is it the strain of the war still ?

LADY PECKHAM. I don't see why it should be. He was only three months out . . . got smashed . . . came home.

STROWDE. He had three years among the stay-at-homes . . . growing up to it. His mind is jangled at the moment. It mayn't last.

LADY PECKHAM. He's very unhappy. I've always wondered whether sometime he ought not to be told.

STROWDE (*looking at her, so to speak, from under his brows*). D'you think that would cheer him?

LADY PECKHAM. D'you think it's possible he knows?

STROWDE. Hardly possible. What gossip there was . . .

LADY PECKHAM. How should we know what gossip there was?

STROWDE. Then why should very stale echoes of it drift his way? Still, it's possible.

LADY PECKHAM. Don't think I'd mind telling him he's your son.

This plain fact—which she has purposely put so plainly—lies, one may say, for consideration on the table between them.

STROWDE. My dear Mildred . . . surely it would be a piece of wanton cruelty.

LADY PECKHAM. I consider you've a right to forbid me to.

STROWDE. You've been seriously thinking of telling him?

LADY PECKHAM. Yes.

STROWDE. Tell me why.

She turns her eyes on herself for a moment, a comparatively infrequent habit.

LADY PECKHAM. I'm a tough old heathen . . . and

I'm a sentimental fool. The two things go together, I suppose.

STROWDE. Often.

LADY PECKHAM. Have you any feeling for Oliver ?

STROWDE. Honestly ?

LADY PECKHAM. Of course.

STROWDE. Well . . . it's hard to define. . . .

LADY PECKHAM. Then you haven't.

STROWDE. I can't contradict you.

LADY PECKHAM. Why expect it ? You were pretty young. We were happy for a bit.

STROWDE. And you threw me over just as suddenly, Mildred.

LADY PECKHAM. You didn't complain.

STROWDE. I had no right to.

LADY PECKHAM. I took a sort of pride, Evan, in sending you off whistling. (*She relaxes to reminiscence*) I remember my father, when I was fifteen, setting forth great-aunt Charlotte to me . . . which had to be done as she's in the history books . . . and took some doing ! He said : She was a bad lot, but a good fellow.

STROWDE. You have a genius, Mildred, for making things seem simple.

LADY PECKHAM (*summarily*). Well . . . I've more energy than brains. And I never could fuss about my immortal soul. I'm not sure that I have one. I used to think I might grow one. But if you can only get it by fussing about it . . . I don't want that sort. So when I die there'll be an end of me. I don't mind. I've done all I can for Oliver. He has lost the need for me. And the same sort of thing's to be gone through

with Dolly . . . though she's no concern of yours . . . nor of any one else's now.

STROWDE (*measuring his mind to the matter*). I don't, of course, refuse responsibility, . . . if you really think I can do something for the boy that no one else can.

LADY PECKHAM (*grimacing, and dragging out the accusing word*). You're so dry, Evan.

STROWDE (*undisturbed*). But he's twenty-six . . .

LADY PECKHAM. Twenty-five.

STROWDE. And he is what he is. He's looking ahead. Why should he thank us for tying this corpse of a story round his neck ?

LADY PECKHAM (*as business-like as he*). He doesn't get on with the Gauntletts. And he can hardly inherit . . . what with Victor's two sons . . . and it's a third on the way, I daresay. He was dutifully fond of Peckham, and Peckham liked him . . . died when he was twelve, though . . . so that's all they knew of each other. Peckham was no fool.

STROWDE (*half-humorously*). I never thought so.

LADY PECKHAM. Except over women. But a sensible husband to me . . . and I was no end of a nuisance of a tomboy when he married me. It's my money Oliver gets. I saw to that.

STROWDE. But surely he'd hate me if he knew . . . whatever I might learn to feel for him.

LADY PECKHAM. And you'd sit down under it ?

STROWDE. What else could I do ?

LADY PECKHAM. What a question !

STROWDE. Give me the answer.

LADY PECKHAM (*with a sudden blaze of feeling*). I'm angry with you.

STROWDE. I retain great respect for your anger.

LADY PECKHAM. Even in those days you always seemed to be looking for something over my shoulder.

STROWDE. Most ungallant of me !

LADY PECKHAM. No . . . I hoped you'd find it.

STROWDE. I never did.

LADY PECKHAM. Are you going to marry Joan Westbury ? *Though this is fired at him without warning his answer is perfectly balanced.*

STROWDE. I hope so.

LADY PECKHAM (*quickly*). You'd mind her knowing ?

STROWDE (*countering effectively*). Would you ?

LADY PECKHAM. Oliver's very fond of her.

STROWDE. Is he ?

LADY PECKHAM (*her voice dropping a tone or two*). When I saw you three in the garden together just now . .

STROWDE. Well ?

LADY PECKHAM. I got ready to give him up. It's far likelier, when he's told, that he'll learn to hate me.

STROWDE (*a little askew*). And it's also possible, isn't it, that Joan might turn her back on the three of us.

LADY PECKHAM (*simply*). I hadn't thought of that.

For the first and only time he permits himself something of a score.

STROWDE. Hadn't you ? I'm afraid I had.

LADY PECKHAM (*most genuinely shocked*). Good God, Evan . . . you used not to think me a cad. And you'd let her ?

STROWDE. You credit me with the queerest powers.

LADY PECKHAM. I've no patience with people that only seem able to live in a mix-up of the past and the future. . . .

STROWDE. The present!

LADY PECKHAM. If Joan finds she's jealous of me, let her take Oliver from me . . . and from you too. I could. That ought to satisfy her.

STROWDE. I doubt if you understand Joan.

LADY PECKHAM. Well enough!

STROWDE. . . . even though you understand me.

LADY PECKHAM. You'd have puzzled me once if I'd let you. But we took things for granted. Well . . . you bear me no grudge, do you?

STROWDE. On the contrary, I apologise.

LADY PECKHAM (*robust, to his subtlety*). What for?

STROWDE. For looking over your shoulder.

LADY PECKHAM. I can tell you this, Evan . . . whatever it was you set out to be when I sent you packing, you ought to be six times the size of it by now. I've played the fool pretty blindly, no doubt . . . but I'm wise where I need to be . . .

STROWDE (*seriously*). That's a great boast.

LADY PECKHAM. Even if I'm not very wise. And you can't put me in the wrong over my children . . . for they've had the best of me . . . and I don't have to ask questions about them . . . I know.

STROWDE. Adopting him as my secretary or what not would prompt some people's memories . . . that was one good reason, I thought, for snubbing the boy.

LADY PECKHAM. Thank you.

STROWDE (*his eyes travelling to the gallery's end*). Here

come the What's-his-names . . . American people . . . Kittredges.

LADY PECKHAM (*without turning*). Can they hear us ?

STROWDE. Not yet . . . they're stopping to look at a picture.

But their talk seems at an end. Lady Peckham adds a postscript.

LADY PECKHAM. I've wondered what the second housemaid felt like when she swore her baby on the footman.

STROWDE. And the footman was adjured to have the feelings of a man ! I'm sorry.

LADY PECKHAM. You'd better dress for dinner. (*Then she smiles wryly*) I once gave you a dog. Did you get fond of it ?

STROWDE. Very. I'm afraid you can't shame me quite so easily.

LADY PECKHAM. Well, Oliver's going wrong . . . and it's breaking my heart.

STROWDE. You'd cut bits out of yourself for him.

LADY PECKHAM. He is a bit cut out of me.

STROWDE (*gravely*). We must tell him if you think it right.

LADY PECKHAM. No. No use.

STROWDE. I wish that I didn't agree.

LADY PECKHAM (*with all her sincerity, and of this, at least, she has much*). But if you can't take what's your own when it's offered you, my friend, I don't know what else is to do you good.

STROWDE (*neither lifting nor lowering his voice*). Look out !

Mr. Kittredge's voice is heard saying as he approaches, "Is it my ignorance to suppose that a Hobbema?"

LADY PECKHAM (*brightly, as she turns*). We'll hope not, Mr. Kittredge, as it is ear-marked for income-tax.

Mr. Kittredge and Susan appear, ready for dinner. He is an old man; of the aristocracy of New England, and of a higher aristocracy too. Susan is his granddaughter; a girl of a grave simplicity, of which she is only a little conscious and not at all ashamed.

MR. KITTREDGE (*with his light touch*). Very unfair, I agree, for any mere nobody to paint such a picture.

LADY PECKHAM (*as one bullies one's oldest friend*). Evan, will you go and get dressed?

STROWDE. Dear me . . . you're my hostess, aren't you?

LADY PECKHAM. I wait dinner twenty minutes and no more. British punctuality, Miss Susan.

STROWDE (*with admirable vigour*). You count a hundred and walk to the hall and pick up the others, and you'll find me waiting by the soup tureen. And I'll trust to your honour for a measured hundred, Miss Kittredge. . . .

By which time he is down the gallery and away.

MR. KITTREDGE (*in his musical tone*). This was your home, Lady Peckham?

LADY PECKHAM. Mamma started married life by being restless. I got born in Venice. But I grew here.

MR. KITTREDGE. I know better than to be enthusiastic in England . . . so I won't remind you how beautiful it is.

LADY PECKHAM (*with British politeness*). You needn't. I know. Though it's ramshackle, all but the kitchens. They're Norman. You must see them. A bit of a nuisance to Stephen now he can't keep it up. He could sell it to a Trade Union for a Convalescent Home. But we've a cousin who's gone into oil, and won't break the entail.

MR. KITTREDGE. I picture a sick bricklayer meditating in the cloister upon his spiritual affinity to the men who built it . . . as a refuge from the anarchy of mind without.

LADY PECKHAM. I can picture him asleep over the Sunday paper.

MR. KITTREDGE. They were Hospitallers, weren't they?

LADY PECKHAM. Order of St. John . . . and I'm a something or other of that now too.

Susan has been standing reposefully where she paused by the window. She now announces as a matter of course, though much to Lady Peckham's astonishment . . .

SUSAN. One hundred.

LADY PECKHAM. What? Oh, thank you.

MR. KITTREDGE. I ask your approval of Susan's upbringing. She does what she is told without comment.

Lady Peckham, once she gets what she'd call the hang of a talk, has a shrewd humour of her own.

LADY PECKHAM. Then she's both a very good girl and a very deceitful one.

The young woman in question now unobtrusively takes part.

MR. KITTREDGE. She smiles. I always think that I know what she means when she smiles . . . but perhaps it's only because I'm fond of her. However, in that at least I'm not deceived.

LADY PECKHAM (*briskly*). Come along. (*But she has to collect the half-dozen etceteras that women, dressed for dinner, carry round in a country house.*) You're writing a book about us, aren't you, Mr. Kittredge . . . somebody told me!

MR. KITTREDGE. No, indeed . . . the warfare of my works is accomplished. They repose in the half-calf of a definitive edition upon the shelves of those gentlemanly libraries which, the advertisements inform me, cannot be considered complete without them. In my hey-day I was read, apparently, but not bought. Now I am bought but not read. Heaven forbid, though, that I should quarrel with the bread and butter I still need to consume.

LADY PECKHAM. But you're a professor?

MR. KITTREDGE. Emeritus.

LADY PECKHAM. Does that mean you don't earn any money by it?

MR. KITTREDGE. That also is implied.

SUSAN (*close at his side*). Your books are read, Grandfather.

MR. KITTREDGE (*his voice caressing her*). Family pride . . . pray pardon it, madam. (*They now make vague starts on their way to dinner.*) From sheer force of habit, though, I am collecting materials for a book I shall never write now . . . and England is rich in them at the moment.

LADY PECKHAM (*seeking a foothold amid the rising waters of intellect*). What's it called ?

MR. KITTREDGE. The Selection of an Aristocracy might serve for a title.

LADY PECKHAM. What does that mean ?

MR. KITTREDGE. You must not indulge my garrulity. I believe . . . the idea is not a new one, of course . . . that a community can only be kept self-respecting and powerful by courage in the continuing selection of an aristocracy.

LADY PECKHAM. Aren't they born ?

MR. KITTREDGE. In that case, circumstances will call for their being bred and born unconventionally at times.

LADY PECKHAM (*turning a sharp eye on his unconscious serenity*). Oh ! Yes . . . I never thought of that.

Now they move slowly down the gallery.

MR. KITTREDGE. In the United States, unfortunately, for the last eighty years . . . my lifetime ! . . . the methods of our material advancement have been too crudely selective for anything one can call an aristocracy to adhere in the social structure. But you are somewhat luckier. Barriers break, but new classes form. The art of social sympathy flourishes just a little more easily in England. . . .

LADY PECKHAM (*reduced to politeness*). Ah ! Yes . . . very interesting, I'm sure. . . .

By this they have disappeared.

SCENE III

It is Sunday, near lunch time. Eleanor is alone in the gallery with her letters and papers. On the terrace a very noisy game is in progress. Dolly Gauntlett's fresh young voice is heard, crying, "Run, Joan! No, not a straighter . . . she'll get you. Stop at Apollo. Oh, I knew she would! That's three games to them. Why didn't you stop at Apollo?" And then Joan's, cheerful but distracted: "But I have to do it in five, haven't I?"

DOLLY. Well, you'd two to spare.

JOAN. No, I took three up.

OLIVER'S VOICE. Yes, she did . . . one to the Faun . . . and one to Diana. . . .

DOLLY. Susan, you're no end of a shot. Let's play women against men . . . and Evan may run twice.

STROWDE'S VOICE. Miss Dorothy Gauntlett . . . do you know my age?

DOLLY. Fiddlededee! Look how Joan runs.

JOAN. Tactful child!

Eleanor walks to the window with a letter which she waves.

ELEANOR. Evan!

STROWDE. What's that? I'll come up.

DOLLY (*raising loud protest*). No, no, no! We can't play four.

ELEANOR. I won't keep him long.

DOLLY. Why do you desecrate the Sabbath by reading reports? Come down and play Straighters.

ELEANOR. I believe I last played Straighters, Dolly, the year before you were born.

DOLLY. Mother's a dab at it still.

The game thus checked, the players seem to be resting beneath the window.

SUSAN. Does that drawing in the library date its being invented?

DOLLY. It's older . . . because of the counting by chases. The tennis court was pulled down in seventeen-fifty. . . .

Strowde, a little the worse for his bout of Straighters, comes in by the turret door, and Eleanor hands him the letter. The voices from below form a curious counterpoint to their talk.

OLIVER. It's only Rounders played straight up the Terrace.

ELEANOR. From Sir Curtis Henry.

STROWDE. What's he plaguing you for?

ELEANOR. Duddington's been at him.

STROWDE. He's been at me.

DOLLY. The paving makes your feet so hot . . . that's the worst.

ELEANOR. Why Sir Curtis should suppose that I could or would persuade you to stand as the Party nominee, I can't imagine.

SUSAN. Was this how Apollo and Diana got their arms broken ?

Strowde finishes the letter and gives it back.

STROWDE. Stockton-on-Crouch is growing agitated, evidently.

DOLLY. There used to be a rule in my young days not to touch the statues.

ELEANOR. But Duddington thinks you could carry it as an Independent, doesn't he ?

STROWDE. Duddington's job as an election agent is to find the greatest common measure of agreement . . .

DOLLY. Oliver, fetch us a towel.

OLIVER. What for ?

STROWDE. . . . and to collar votes from Anarchists, Christadelphians, Anti-vivisectionists, members of the Flat Earth Society and old Uncle Tom Cobley and all.

DOLLY. We three females will then go dabble our six hot feet in the fountain.

Strowde puts his head sharply out of the window.

STROWDE. Dolly, don't be a fool . . . you'll give yourselves frightful colds.

DOLLY. Silence, Methusaleh.

ELEANOR. Well, what shall I say to the valiantly tactful Sir Curtis ?

DOLLY. Come along !

JOAN. No !

DOLLY. Joan Westbury . . . do you want me to carry you there like a sack of potatoes or a Sabine lady ?

STROWDE. Give him a taste of your quality. You'll be a candidate yourself yet.

JOAN. I shall ask your mother to put you on a lowering diet, Dolly.

STROWDE. My part in the answer is that I'm still considering whether I'll stand at all.

DOLLY. I'd tuck Susan under my arm too for tuppence.

Come along. Come along !

If you stick to me you can't go wrong !

And Dolly can be heard whooping triumphantly along the terrace. The other two follow her, their voices tell us.

SUSAN. Are you so hot ?

JOAN. Only breathless . . . a little.

ELEANOR. Very well. I'll say that.

Strowde turns to go, but turns again.

STROWDE. Have you read my notes on your report ?

ELEANOR. I was just about to. You haven't told me what you make of it as a whole.

STROWDE. It's dull.

ELEANOR. The Industrial Birth-rate is not a lively subject. Perhaps Part Two upon Wages of Young Persons will amuse you more.

STROWDE. When is that to be ready ?

ELEANOR. We still have the West Riding evidence to take.

STROWDE. Shall I do a draft in rhyme for you ?

Equal work for equal wages,

Boys and girls who read these pages !

Men and women through the ages !

Twelve disinterested sages

Have arrived by easy stages
At the . . . gages . . . cages. . . .

But I fear my nonsense doesn't ring like Dolly's.

ELEANOR (*who has been looking at him very steadily for the last few moments*). Evan . . . since we passed the last of those proofs in September you haven't, as far as I know, done a stroke of work. You make a mock bow now and then to this Committee drudgery of mine . . .

STROWDE. It must be. But you enjoy it.

ELEANOR. As long as I'm busy I'm happy, I fear.

STROWDE. Don't be ashamed of that.

ELEANOR. Are we ever to begin our last volume ?

STROWDE. Probably never. I'm sorry.

Her face does not change, magnanimity does not fail her.

ELEANOR. Well . . . give me good reason why, and we'll say no more about it.

His face does change. It softens ; but the softening seems to age it rather. His eyes seek distances.

STROWDE. Do you remember the book's very first plan ?

ELEANOR. Yes . . . if you confided it to me.

STROWDE. When it was to be called . . . long ago . . . The Philosophy of Machinery. A towering title !

ELEANOR. I was looking at your discarded chapters only the other day.

STROWDE. Any good ?

ELEANOR. Very well written.

STROWDE (*with a touch of the schoolboy*). And a poser

of a problem. I can quote my first sentence: How is the spirit of man to be given power over his prosperity? Most conscientiously we set to and rounded up the prosperous facts and counted the cost of them in four fat volumes. Only the problem remains.

ELEANOR. Quite so.

STROWDE (*in a tone that might almost be thought compassionate*). You still face the future, Eleanor?

ELEANOR (*with some humour*). It's coming.

STROWDE (*promptly responsive*). The prospects of the break-up of the atom don't alarm you.

ELEANOR. If we can break it up we can teach it how to behave . . . if we choose.

STROWDE. I ought to respect your confident sanity. It has been as a strong wall about my more domestic self these forty years. Father bequeathed it to you.

ELEANOR. I think so.

STROWDE. I'm not a bit like him?

ELEANOR. Not very.

STROWDE (*whimsically*). Poor Mother!

ELEANOR (*gravely*). No, I believe she was a very happy woman.

STROWDE (*remorseful*). My dear . . . we've been happy . . . and thank you. Forgive the gibe.

ELEANOR. Is there anything I could have done for you, Evan, that I have not?

STROWDE (*chivalrously candid*). No indeed. You were fully yourself at sixteen. You have been unwearied in well-doing. And I'm still a naughty boy. But why is it, Eleanor, that for all your goodness and my clever-

ness, for all the assembled virtues of this jolly house-party, and the good-will that's going begging throughout the world . . . how is it that we shan't establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth by Tuesday week?

ELEANOR. We could be content with less.

STROWDE (*finely*). I used to think that was one reason we failed.

ELEANOR. Yes. I have some sense, even some sense of humour . . . of my own. But I am still simple enough to wonder why.

STROWDE. For you have never found that the whole world's turmoil is but a reflection of the anarchy in your own heart?

ELEANOR. No.

STROWDE. That's where we differ, then.

She looks rather sadly across the gulf between them.

ELEANOR. I fear you have always kept up appearances a little with me.

STROWDE. I fear you have always believed in them.

ELEANOR. And I'm to end by confessing I know nothing about you.

STROWDE. Do you want to know more than what I mean to be up to next? This time, as it happens, I can't tell you . . . for the best of reasons. Mischief, perhaps.

ELEANOR. Yes . . . you're a naughty boy at heart.

STROWDE (*with a dash of impatience*). Where the devil else can one be anything at all? Have you never gone adventuring . . . dear good Eleanor . . . in your secret heart?

ELEANOR (*her curbed resentment just evident*). I notice you call me good in the tone you might tell your wife . . . if you had one . . . that she was pretty.

STROWDE. And then I escape to where there is neither prettiness nor goodness.

ELEANOR. I let you. Would she ?

STROWDE. Is that why I haven't married ?

ELEANOR. I have never enquired into your relations with women . . .

STROWDE (*brotherly in the extreme*). My dear . . . don't talk like a Scottish divine addressing King Charles the Second !

ELEANOR. I have supposed that as a rule they weren't very civilised.

STROWDE. Possibly not . . . though possibly not in your sense of the word. For civilisation formulates vice as it formulates virtue, doesn't it . . . and I'm not interested in formulas.

ELEANOR (*dismissing sophistry*). Our work together is to end then. Well . . . if you're going into Bellingham's government . . . if you're going to marry Joan Westbury . . .

STROWDE (*not quite to be treated so, but wielding his own weapons*). And civilise the relation.

ELEANOR. I hadn't Joan in mind . . . and please don't pretend to think it.

STROWDE. But the angels in heaven, you know, are not what we should call civilised.

ELEANOR. When these trifles are settled, no doubt you'll tell me.

Lady Peckham, as from Church, and, as usual,

in the best of spirits, comes in by the turret door. She is followed by Mr. Kittredge.

LADY PECKHAM. Morning, Evan.

STROWDE. Been to Church ?

LADY PECKHAM. Sitting among the tombs of the Serocolds. I believe I wrecked my youthful eyesight reading those epitaphs in sermon-time.

MR. KITTREDGE. I was whisperingly commanded to translate the Latin ones.

LADY PECKHAM. I suspect your translations, Mr. Kittredge.

MR. KITTREDGE. There are more ways than one of reading most epitaphs.

LADY PECKHAM. I'd better write my own.

MR. KITTREDGE. The work of a lifetime !

STROWDE. Stephen go with you ?

LADY PECKHAM. Haven't seen him.

STROWDE. In your absence the effigies are left, I fear, to set a rather chilly example.

LADY PECKHAM. Stephen ought to go to Church when he's here. It's not fair to the Rector. I like going. I much prefer saying my prayers in public . . . and it's the only place where they'll let me sing.

From the other end of the gallery comes Dolly's voice, strepitant, with, " Evan . . . stand still . . . you're the winning post . . . stick your arms out." Strowde does as he is bid, and the rest gaze. Mr. Kittredge obligingly clears a chair from the course. We hear a skurrying. Dolly and Joan are racing down the gallery neck and neck. The winning post reached, Joan

flings herself in a chair, with an "Ay de mi!". Dolly is barefoot; a strapping young lady of twenty, abounding in healthy, thoughtless vigour.

DOLLY. Did I win?

STROWDE. Not you!

DOLLY. Oh . . . I lose a pound . . . and I wanted one badly. You're nowhere!

This last is addressed to Susan Kittredge, who comes in conscientiously, a bad third. Mr. Kittredge shakes a humorously solemn head at her.

MR. KITTREDGE. Susan, if you mean to invest your small capital in racing you must do better.

DOLLY (*the sport!*). No . . . she wasn't to pay if she lost . . . because she thinks betting's wrong.

SUSAN. I don't. I only said I didn't bet.

DOLLY. What about bare feet over the gravel for a handicap anyway?

SUSAN. I caught my dress on the big door.

ELEANOR. Joan . . . ought you to run like that?

JOAN (*sunnily triumphant*). But I won!

Eleanor, after this grave and spectacled remonstrance, returns to reading her report. The rest of the company settle themselves at ease, Dolly in the window seat, oblivious to chills. Mr. Kittredge sets the talk to a smooth flow again.

MR. KITTREDGE. A granddaughter is a terrifying responsibility for an ignorant old man whose business it has been to theorise about life. But I think it a subtle form of cruelty to children to educate them in ideals

that the world they will emerge into never means to abide by. So I try to fix Susan's attention upon the simple arithmetic of things. Is that wise?

LADY PECKHAM. Mr. Kittredge, you're a most accomplished flirt, and I only wish I were up to your form. Bait Eleanor for a bit . . . she's intellectual. I'll look on.

MR. KITTREDGE. Miss Strowde is entrenched against frivolity.

ELEANOR (*over the edge of the report*). No.

MR. KITTREDGE. But it's true. As my spirit outwears its fleshly trammels I feel in it the stirrings of a quite reckless youth.

Here a towel comes flying through the window. Dolly, with ready skill, catches it.

DOLLY. Thank you, Oliver.

STROWDE. Did you feel an older man at fifty, sir?

MR. KITTREDGE. Much.

STROWDE. That's cheering.

DOLLY (*as a matter of general interest*). Mother . . . I've cut my great toe.

LADY PECKHAM. Wash it with Condy.

DOLLY (*and with some pride*). It's bleeding.

LADY PECKHAM. I don't believe I've ever felt any particular age. I sleep like a log . . . I don't dream . . . and every morning at half-past seven I wake up wide and say to myself: Hullo, here I am again.

STROWDE. Good for you, Mildred. Be grateful.

MR. KITTREDGE. What do you find fifty's worse symptom, Mr. Strowde?

STROWDE. That it's easy to stop and hard to begin.

MR. KITTREDGE. Yes . . . if one stops to think. Doing defeats itself. In disgust of mere doing men turn to destroy.

STROWDE. I'd enlist under Oliver for red revolution . . . but I don't think there'll be one if I enlist.

DOLLY (*her head out of the window*). Do you hear that, Oliver?

OLIVER'S VOICE. No.

STROWDE. Or I might apply for his leavings in the City. Mildred . . . do you see me as a financier-philanthropist and a secret menace to the peace of Europe?

LADY PECKHAM. You talk worse nonsense than he does.

MR. KITTREDGE. We're all driven to talk nonsense at times . . . when no other weapon is left us against the masters of the world . . . who have made language and logic, you see, to suit their own purposes.

DOLLY. Got a handkerchief, Oliver?

OLIVER'S VOICE. Dash it, I fetched you a towel. Wipe your nose on the corner.

DOLLY (*as one who speaks the tongue that Milton spoke*). I wish to blow my nose.

LADY PECKHAM. Really, Dolly!

DOLLY. Don't you want me to be clean?

LADY PECKHAM. Very, very clean, my darling . . . as you'll never be godly.

DOLLY. Thank God!

Serocold comes down the gallery.

SEROCOLD. Good morning, guests.

LADY PECKHAM. Just up?

SEROCOLD. Mildred . . . I was milking a cow on behalf of your breakfast at six-thirty.

STROWDE. No one believes that, Stephen.

SEROCOLD. It is very nearly true.

DOLLY. Uncle Stephen, will you lend me a pound?

SEROCOLD (*with ceremonially avuncular politeness*). For how long is the accommodation required?

DOLLY. Till I can take you on at tennis.

SEROCOLD. I do not play tennis for money.

DOLLY. But how mean of you when you've got some!

SEROCOLD. No Bellingham for lunch.

LADY PECKHAM. Oh?

DOLLY. Well, he'd have been a bit tough . . . would Broken Bellows. That is a joke.

The joke, however, is ignored.

SEROCOLD. Telephones he has toothache. Not even neuralgia!

LADY PECKHAM. Evan, who told him you were here?

STROWDE. Stephen, I trust.

SEROCOLD. He invited himself . . . he told me he wanted to meet you by accident.

STROWDE. You are an incorrigible intriguer.

DOLLY. It's Oliver! The silly old snob won't lunch with a gaol-bird. Hurrah!

JOAN. Perhaps he has toothache.

SEROCOLD. You've not yet met our Prime Minister, Mr. Kittredge?

MR. KITTREDGE. Not for thirty years. I shall hope for another chance.

STROWDE. Don't. Well . . . I'm unfair to the

creature, I suppose. I retain a perverse affection for him. But the worst of democracy, don't you find, sir, is that it tends to breed these low forms of political life. You could slice bits out of Bellingham and each bit would wriggle off . . . and he'd find them all seats in Parliament and make them under-secretaries.

DOLLY. Vote for Brooke Bellingham . . . our only bulwark against Bolshevism.

SEROCOLD. Dolly . . . I'll send you electioneering.

STROWDE. Think of it. A line of alliteration between us and the abyss.

OLIVER'S VOICE. A bas Belinjam ! Conspuez Brooke.

LADY PECKHAM (*as one who is really anxious for the information*). D'you think it's coming ?

MR. KITTREDGE. Why, we are living already, you may say, under a dictation of the intellectual proletariat . . . and how few of us complain ! Yes, I think we must finally be ruled by the people who provide us with what we want most in the world. Comforts, power, or wisdom. Artisan, king, or philosopher. Which will you exalt ?

STROWDE. Not the philosopher, Mildred.

LADY PECKHAM. Think not ? Why not ?

STROWDE. He'll always be finding fresh things for you to do without. That makes his job easy for him.

LADY PECKHAM (*cheerily*). I wouldn't mind a revolution . . . if Oliver and you and Stephen would run it.

SEROCOLD. I will not. I'm tired.

LADY PECKHAM. But save us from cads.

MR. KITTREDGE. Amen.

STROWDE. Yes, when we consider what the gentlemen have been capable of occasionally, God knows what the cads may do.

ELEANOR (*to give—for Mr. Kittredge's benefit—the conversation a seemlier turn*). You're a Conservative, I fancy, Mr. Kittredge . . . like most Americans I meet.

MR. KITTREDGE. You may call me a re-actionary, Miss Strowde. Me . . . as they say in my expressive country . . . for the divine right of kings, rather than the divine rights of property.

SEROCOLD (*the harassed farmer*). Well, any one may have this property who likes. . . . if they'll pay me five hundred a year to manage it for them.

LADY PECKHAM. Twenty years back, if we'd known it, was our time for a good revolution.

DOLLY. It's never too late to smash.

LADY PECKHAM. I don't want any more killing.

DOLLY (*radiant in the sunshine by the window*). I tell you though . . women are going to fight in the next war. And if we hurry up I can be in the Air Force. Susan, I'll come and bomb your little head off, first thing.

SUSAN (*with 'New England' seriousness—as it is called elsewhere*). Please do.

From now the talk flags and loosens a little.

SEROCOLD. How long do you stay in England, Mr. Kittredge?

MR. KITTREDGE. Will you promise me a General Election by November? Susan is studying politics, and she wants to see one.

LADY PECKHAM (*stupent*). What on earth is she doing that for ?

SEROCOLD. I can't promise.

ELEANOR (*with one of her rare smiles for the girl*). I can provide you with more profitable study meanwhile.

SUSAN. Thank you, indeed. Lady Westbury says that she'll come back to Countesbury with us, Grandfather.

JOAN. May I leave it at perhaps, for a little ? But I've travelled Eastwards so much that it's time I went West, isn't it ?

DOLLY. D'you mean die ?

JOAN. I didn't.

SEROCOLD. My dear Dolly !

DOLLY. That's what that means.

MR. KITTREDGE. Please do come and see us, Lady Westbury, sitting in blankets before our wigwams.

JOAN. What must I bring to trade with ?

MR. KITTREDGE. Your heart.

SUSAN. Our woods are beautiful in the autumn.

JOAN. I thought you called it the Fall.

MR. KITTREDGE. That sounds too sad, don't you think ? But by November we're tucked up in snow very often.

JOAN. I may go on to Japan. Eva Currie wants me to . . . to be there by Christmas.

LADY PECKHAM. Dolly, go and make yourself half way decent for lunch.

DOLLY (*who knows an order when she hears it*). Yes, Mother.

STROWDE. Die . . . how we hate the word ! And we none of us really believe we're going to.

LADY PECKHAM. I believe it.

STROWDE. Oh, we're ready to surrender what we've done with and don't value . . .

ELEANOR. The work of our minds lives on.

STROWDE. By taking thought to ? Show me a living faith, and I'll show it you careless of life. Dolly there, in her pride of body . . .

DOLLY. I say !

STROWDE . . . would jump out of that window for sixpence.

DOLLY. I'll do it for a pound. Oliver's underneath.

STROWDE. But this world of the mind we've made for ourselves is cumbered with things that we won't let die. Ask Oliver . . . if I yield to temptation and go back to trying to help govern this ungrateful country whether he'll promise to see me decently assassinated when I've done my devilmost ?

DOLLY (*her head out of the window*). Oliver, will you please see Evan decently assassinated ?

OLIVER'S VOICE. It hasn't been settled yet who's to be let off living . . . but he may choose his lamp-post on the chance.

STROWDE. You'll be content, Mildred, if a little of you lives on in that child ?

LADY PECKHAM. Heaven forbid I should worry her !

DOLLY. What a disgusting thought !

SEROCOLD. Then don't you think it.

DOLLY. I won't !

And, every bit herself, she sets out down the gallery.

STROWDE. Dolly, I'll toss you for a pound.

DOLLY (*at this gleam of great hope*). Oo! Suppose I lose.

STROWDE. A month's credit.

DOLLY. Oo!

But, too fearful of the risk, Dolly disappears.

STROWDE. The life of the mind is a prison in which we go melancholy mad. Better turn dangerous . . . and be done away with.

Dolly's voice is heard from the end of the gallery.

DOLLY. Evan.

STROWDE. Hullo!

DOLLY. I'll risk it. Heads!

Strowde takes out a coin and tosses it.

MR. KITTREDGE. There is, of course, that faculty we call the soul by which we may escape into uncharted regions.

STROWDE. Heads it is!

DOLLY (*her voice is fervent*). Thank God!

MR. KITTREDGE. But the rulers of men seldom seek them. Very naturally!

JOAN. Why?

MR. KITTREDGE. A confusing place, the world where the soul wanders . . . made of mud and light . . . and the mud sticks and the light dazzles. Lonely . . . yet in it we can keep nothing of our own. For entering we abandon everything but hope . . . and hope is a lure.

JOAN. Towards what?

MR. KITTREDGE. This is a secret.

JOAN. They can overhear.

MR. KITTREDGE. . . . well known, and disbelieved.

It's so discouraging. The soul of man is in the making still . . . we are experiments to be tried again and yet again . . . and the light lures us to extinction. Can you rule a country prosperously on such a creed? No . . . have a comfortable Kingdom of Heaven just round the corner . . . or who will take a step towards it?

STROWDE. Besides, Stephen, you don't want this country governed.

SEROCOLD. Truthfully, I think we want it kept amused at the moment . . . till we see what's going to happen next.

The three men begin to move down the gallery. Susan, attentive, has already been standing for a moment or two by the turret door. Some moments ago too, Eleanor came to the end of her report and her brother's notes on it, and she has been sitting—her face unchanging, but particularly still.

STROWDE. So I'm not your man.

ELEANOR. Evan.

STROWDE (*pausing*). Yes.

ELEANOR (*a little cryptically*). Are these notes for vulgar reading?

STROWDE (*even more so*). My legacy to you.

MR. KITTREDGE (*casually, to his host*). I don't quite understand why Mr. Bellingham hasn't dissolved before this.

SEROCOLD. We can't get defeated in the House on any likely issue.

STROWDE. Prisoned minds, Mr. Kittredge . . . and

a world of power to be wielded that might stagger the purpose of a Caesar. What the deuce will happen next? For all that I don't much care, I shake in my shoes.

The three men have disappeared.

LADY PECKHAM. What notes, Eleanor?

ELEANOR. Evan poking fun at my report.

Susan goes out by the turret door. The three women, without looking, are conscious of her disappearance.

LADY PECKHAM. That's a strange, still girl. Is she stone cold inside, or just on the boil?

JOAN. I see great beauty in her.

LADY PECKHAM (*her eyebrows up*). Do you!

JOAN. It'll shine out in time.

LADY PECKHAM. I don't understand Americans. They're so solemn.

Joan, light of foot, moves slowly down the gallery.

ELEANOR. They take things seriously.

LADY PECKHAM. And so devilish gay when they're gay.

ELEANOR. I don't find them hard to understand.

A moment's silence, now that the two are alone; then Lady Peckham cocks her head with what, unkindly, might be called a grin.

LADY PECKHAM. We two old harridans, Eleanor!

ELEANOR (*mustering enough humour*). Thank you.

LADY PECKHAM. Between us, I expect, we've tasted most of the fat and the lean of life. Well . . . nothing tastes like it.

ELEANOR. You're worried about Oliver.

LADY PECKHAM. Not a bit.

ELEANOR. What took him to that meeting? Who encourages him in this foolishness?

LADY PECKHAM. I think he spins it out of his own inside.

ELEANOR. Well, as long as he behaves himself! . . .

LADY PECKHAM. I hope he'll do more than that.

ELEANOR (*with a will-not-be-exasperated sigh*). We're at odds, I'm afraid, Mildred.

LADY PECKHAM (*plumply*). We always were.

The distant lunch gong is heard.

LADY PECKHAM. I should get Evan married to Joan Westbury if I were you. That might settle him. Or are you too jealous of her?

ELEANOR. What an amazing question!

LADY PECKHAM. You're so consistent, Eleanor . . . that's what's the matter with you.

ELEANOR. There's little I could do . . . in any case.

LADY PECKHAM. Were you ever in love?

Eleanor, for a second, does not mean to answer. Then—why shouldn't she?

ELEANOR. Once.

LADY PECKHAM. What happened?

ELEANOR (*after a moment's appropriate emptiness*). Nothing.

LADY PECKHAM. I believe you. (*She doesn't in the least mean this to be brutal; commiserative rather. Then she goes on*) If you hate Joan, try putting a little poison in her soup . . . and then getting on your knees

to ask God to forgive you for it. That'd teach you something.

They have collected their belongings, and make a move now for lunch.

ELEANOR. A little hard on her!

LADY PECKHAM. Well, considering everybody in this world means considering nobody, you know. . . .

They pass down the gallery.

SCENE IV

It is Sunday evening about ten o'clock (summer time). Joan is sitting alone by the open window; the clear sky still glows a little. She has turned out the light near her, but those farther down the gallery are apparent. After a moment Oliver's voice is heard from below.

OLIVER. Lady Westbury.

JOAN. Yes.

OLIVER. May I come up?

JOAN. You may. (*When his way of coming up is apparent she calls out*) Oliver! You'll kill yourself!!

His head and shoulders appear at the window. He stops, a little breathless. This is something of a feat for a one-armed man, though a creeper may be helping him a little.

OLIVER. That wasn't so bad. Now comes the pull. If you take hold we'll both tumble. Hold your breath and think hard. Now!

With a great effort he flings himself over the window-sill into the room, and rolls on the floor. But he picks himself up lightly enough.

OLIVER. And I'm not drunk, am I?

JOAN. You shouldn't run such risks.

OLIVER. I was last night . . . on one half glass of claret. Nobody noticed. To-night I've had a bottle of port to my own whack . . . and I'm so sober that it hurts. May I sit and talk to you?

JOAN. Yes.

He sits on the window-seat facing her, not very close.

OLIVER. Shall I try not to talk about myself?

JOAN. No, I'd like you to.

But not many people would find her easy to talk to at all, she is so still and so aloof. There is a little silence.

OLIVER. Why won't Evan take me on?

JOAN. He hasn't told me.

OLIVER. They say you're going to marry him.

JOAN (*her eyebrows lifting*). Do they? (*Then whimsically*) Well . . . shall I?

OLIVER. Don't ask me. I'm in love with you too.

She lets the simple speech find its full value in her ears, then says as simply . . .

JOAN. Thank you, Oliver.

OLIVER (*in a happy, quite childish surprise*). D'you mean it?

JOAN. Didn't you expect so much as a thank you?

OLIVER. May I say just once . . . I love you . . . like that? The echoes won't be troublesome.

They have not moved, either of them. She is listening in the stillness to other boys' voices.

JOAN. I live among echoes, my dear. But you mustn't.

OLIVER. I won't. (*His voice hardens to a perversely*

obstinate tone) What am I to do, please, if Evan won't take me on ?

JOAN. Is he your only hope ?

OLIVER (*with deliberation*). He's in my way.

JOAN. What does that mean ?

OLIVER. Sounds like a plot to blow him sky high one day as he walks into Downing Street. I think I did make Uncle Stephen believe at dinner that I'd been sworn into at least one secret society . . . for all he pretended not to.

JOAN. It's Mr. Serocold's business, I suppose, to take such things seriously.

OLIVER. Yes, it is. So why doesn't he ? Tell them the truth and they don't believe you !

JOAN. I will.

OLIVER. The men with the secrets that count will know each other when the time comes, won't they ?

JOAN. Yes, that sounds more dangerous.

OLIVER. There'll be nothing doing else.

JOAN. Why is Evan in your way ?

OLIVER (*launched on the full youthful enjoyment of a talk about oneself*). I wonder what it is in one that picks out a man or a woman. Evan was picked out for me, you may say. Mother has always been fond of him. My father was fond of him. I remember saying once, when I was eight, that I meant to grow up to be like him.

JOAN. And you're not fond of many people.

OLIVER. I hate most people . . . when I come to think of it.

JOAN. Is that why it hurts you to be sober ?

OLIVER. I shall swear off drink again, though . . . it just doesn't do not to know what a glass of claret's going to cost you.

One half of her disposition towards him is as simple (though by no means the same) as his towards her. But the other half is—in involuntary defence perhaps—coloured by the ironic superiority of forty something to twenty something.

JOAN. But tell me how one soberly hates people. I don't think I know.

OLIVER. Well, you can't love the mob, surely to goodness! Because that's to be one of them . . . chattering and scolding and snivelling and cheering . . . maudlin drunk, if you like! I learned to be soldier enough to hate a mob. There's discipline in Heaven. If I can't love a thing I must hate it.

JOAN. How long have you been so unhappy?

OLIVER. Don't think I'm out after happiness, please.

JOAN (*gravely*). Do you ever pray, Oliver?

OLIVER (*prompt*). All the time. Whenever I'd a hard job on in the City I'd walk there in the morning praying like fun. If I hadn't prayed my way in at this window I'd have broken my neck. I pray all the time.

JOAN. How old are you? I forget.

His face takes on a deeper shade than any yet; and all the fantastic flourish goes out of his speech.

OLIVER. I believe I'm still eighteen.

JOAN. How's that?

OLIVER. Years don't count for much, do they . . .

as against memory, say? Parts of me seem to forget all about the war . . . but there's some part of me doesn't. A shell missed me outside Albert and did for my watch. I could shake it and it would tick for a bit . . . but the spring was gone. I've an idea I don't grow any older now . . . and when I come to die it'll seem an odd out-of-date sort of catastrophe. I'm furious that I'm still alive at all. Perhaps it's that makes me hate people. I used to pray night after night at school that I'd be killed when I got to France.

JOAN (*moved, but more deeply by memories*). That was perverse of you . . . to be fighting against our prayers.

OLIVER. Oh, once I was there I didn't mind saving my skin. But I tell you . . . this is a beast of a world to have left on one's hands.

A little silence; then Joan rallies to the commonplace.

JOAN. Well, what are you going to do about it?

OLIVER. Destroy.

JOAN. What?

OLIVER. All I can learn to.

JOAN. Didn't you see enough destruction?

OLIVER. A futile sort. My firm bought a lot of shares, and we thought we had a mine in Eastern Galicia . . . so I was sent out two years ago to see. The town was a rubbish heap. Typhus had done well too. But there they were breeding children to build it all up again . . . that being the cheapest way. So if we can't do some better destroying than that who'll ever be able to make a fresh start? Save me from

weary people with their No More War. What we want is a real one.

JOAN. And where's the enemy?

OLIVER. If I knew where I shouldn't be sitting here helpless. I'm looking for him. But we're tricked so easily . . . on from the time that we're tricked into getting born! This world's all tricks, isn't it? Well, it's something to feel free from the greedy instinct to live.

JOAN (*puzzled, kindly, and as curious as it is in her to be*). And what has Evan to teach you?

OLIVER. I want to find out how it is he has failed.

JOAN. Has he failed, then?

OLIVER (*a trifle savagely*). Yes . . . and you'll have to comfort him for it if you marry him.

JOAN (*provokingly, rather*). But wise men like your uncle say that if he'll take office again, now the bunglers have had a chance . . . there's his career still. And he wasn't a failure in office before.

OLIVER. He'll need more comfort than that, if I'm right about him. Nothing's much easier, is it, than to make that sort of success if you've the appetite for it. Find a few ready-made notions to exploit. But Evan set out to get, past all tricks, to the heart of things . . . didn't he? Don't you know? Don't you love him? Are you weary of the puzzle too?

JOAN. The very tallest of us ask for comfort sometimes.

OLIVER. Is it a stone dead heart of things . . . and dare no one say so when he finds out?

JOAN. I suppose one never would dare.

OLIVER. Evan won't take me on because he's afraid of me.

JOAN (*the one-time mother in her sharply asserting itself*) Nonsense!

OLIVER. I can tell he's afraid of me. Why? Because he knows that I know he has failed. And he knows that I hate him for it.

JOAN. Very wicked nonsense, Oliver!

OLIVER (*flinging out harshly*). Oh, do him in with comfort if you like. Trick him. Do your best, dear Evan, and no man can do more in this worst-of-all-possible worlds! If he had any self-respect left in him he'd thank you to hate him rather.

JOAN (*with a flash of inspiration*). You're very like him.

OLIVER (*struck, though he could not say why*). Am I?

JOAN. Oh . . . not in any ordinary sense.

OLIVER. We're all like mother to look at . . . more or less.

A short silence, while they turn back from this blind alley.

JOAN (*lightly enough*). And how is it . . . with all else to be thrown on the rubbish heap . . . that you love me?

OLIVER. You're out of reach.

JOAN (*as if she did indeed, and better than ever he could . . .*). Yes . . . I understand.

OLIVER. So I'm not jealous of the fellow. But I rather wish I hadn't told you.

JOAN. Why?

OLIVER (*boyhood having its way*). Or that you'd

laughed . . . that would set me free again. Please set me free.

JOAN. Am I to ask Evan to take you on ?

OLIVER (*obsessed*). Yes . . . for I want to be free of him too. Somehow he's right athwart my understanding of things, though I can't tell why. And I won't take a step that I can't see clear. Then I shan't take many . . . is the answer. I've been told that before.

JOAN. If you came to understand him you might learn not to hate him.

OLIVER. Yes, there's that danger !

Joan surveys him for a moment, then says with evident intent . . .

JOAN. Oliver . . . you never laugh now, I've noticed.

OLIVER. At myself ?

JOAN. Well, that's a simple form of destruction. You might try it to begin with.

He stands up, stung, as she meant he should be.

OLIVER. Good night.

JOAN. I've made you angry.

OLIVER (*pride quite forbidding response*). No. I was off on my walk when I saw you at the window.

JOAN. Every night . . . wet or fine . . . how many miles ?

OLIVER. Seven or eight . . . till I'm too tired to think.

JOAN (*more sorrowful for him than she can say, or he could understand*). The night is all one's own, isn't it . . . if only the inconsiderate sun wouldn't rise.

OLIVER (*taking refuge in bravado*). Is this how you

comfort me? There's no need, thank you. I've not failed yet. (*Then, for a last shot, as with charming impudence*) Good night, Joan.

JOAN. But mind your prayers, Oliver. (*He turns, rather amazed.*) For innermost prayers are answered . . . they must be . . . and in mockery sometimes.

OLIVER. Something in me was killed, d'you think?

JOAN. Not stone dead, we'll hope.

OLIVER. No, Joan . . . we won't hope, whatever else we do.

He opens the door into the turret.

JOAN. Not by the window again?

OLIVER. Too easy.

JOAN (*in the same soft clear voice that welcomed him*). Good night, then, my dear.

He goes away.

SCENE V

It is Monday morning, a little after nine. Sir Leslie Heriot, in motoring things, comes striding along as if looking for some one. He is an ebullient, middle-aged man, pleasant, coarse-grained, and always a little louder than, we'll hope, he means to be. If anything is written quite unmistakably upon him, it is success and an intense enjoyment of it. He glances out of the window; then faces down the gallery again just as Strowde's voice is heard from the other end.

STROWDE. Hullo, Heriot.

HERIOT. Hullo, Strowde.

STROWDE. What are you doing here?

HERIOT. Came to run Stephen up to town. Good morning, Miss Strowde.

ELEANOR'S VOICE. Good morning, Sir Leslie.

Strowde appears. Eleanor must be lagging behind.

STROWDE. You must have left early.

HERIOT. Seven o'clock. I've not been at home . . . week-ending at Eckersley . . . it's sixty miles . . . the road must be better through Basingstoke. How are you?

STROWDE. I'm alive.

Sir Leslie takes up an habitual "I-never-beat-about-the-bush" attitude.

HERIOT. Get any talk with Bellingham yesterday?

STROWDE. He didn't come.

HERIOT (*flavourishly*). I knew he wouldn't.

STROWDE. How's your job nowadays?

HERIOT (*who, oddly enough, is really a modest soul*). There's enough to do without making more. But I'm up to the trick of it this time. Let your office fellows pull the cart while you drive.

STROWDE. That is undoubtedly the whole art of government.

HERIOT (*as one who reverences the process*). And take time to think. I used to keep my nose buried in papers eight hours a day. Now I send for the men who write them . . . there's a new lot of quite good young men . . . and size them up instead. (*Turning his head*) How is my Women's Industry committee getting on, Miss Strowde?

Eleanor now appears.

ELEANOR. We're making the interim report you asked for.

HERIOT (*with entire honesty*). Did I?

ELEANOR. Though I think it's a pity to mangle the subject.

HERIOT. Oh no . . . no, no! Be practical . . . that's the great thing. (*He just does not smack Strowde on the back*) Does this fellow help you out at all?

Eleanor, who—how surprising!—has not come to talk to Sir Leslie, is searching the writing-table.

ELEANOR. Surely I did leave my spectacles. . . .

STROWDE (*answering Heriot*). Not at all.

HERIOT. And the great history's finished ?

ELEANOR. No.

HERIOT. I hear you're coming out into politics.

ELEANOR. I think not.

HERIOT. But do . . . it's great fun. No, perhaps you're right. We need intellectual spade-work. . . .

STROWDE (*having found the spectacles*). Here they are.

ELEANOR. Thank you.

HERIOT (*magnanimously overriding the neglect of him for a pair of spectacles*). And I take off my hat . . . I do indeed . . . to this steady self-sacrifice of all personal ambition by which public men profit . . . or should profit. (*Then in his never-beat-about-the-bush attitude again*) Strowde . . . have we got to fight you at the election ?

STROWDE. Who said I was going to stand ?

HERIOT (*omniscient*). But you are.

Eleanor has now passed out of sight.

STROWDE. I've been asked to.

HERIOT. I know all about it.

STROWDE. When is it to be . . . secrets apart ?

HERIOT (*as colleague to colleague*). I doubt if the old man has started to make up his mind. November . . . February. We could drop the Insurance Bill if the Chinese business would straighten out.

STROWDE. You think you'll come back ?

HERIOT. Who else can ? (*As brother to brother*) Look here . . . is it only Bellingham stands in the way ?

STROWDE. Of . . . ?

HERIOT. . . . your coming back to us ?

STROWDE (*blandly*). Oh, dear, no.

HERIOT. What else ?

STROWDE. Why do you want me ?

HERIOT (*benevolent, warm, but, one fears, patronising*). My dear fellow . . . am I to flatter you ?

STROWDE (*a shade subtly*). If you think it advisable.

HERIOT. Well, I won't. I'll come straight to the point. I came here this morning to come to the point with you.

STROWDE (*as he would encourage a child*). Good.

Heriot now speaks, as he would tell you, with a due sense of the subject's importance.

HERIOT. It's two years since I told Bellingham how vital I felt it to be for the Party to get you back. I've given him till now to make it up with you. Well, now I'm ready to say that sine qua non . . . sine qua non me ! . . . We must find you a seat again, and a seat in the Cabinet, after the election.

STROWDE (*easily*). I've found the seat, Heriot.

HERIOT. Even if we fight you there ?

STROWDE. Do your damnedest.

HERIOT. I don't want to.

Strowde now takes the rudder.

STROWDE. Bellingham's getting a bit feeble, is he ?

HERIOT (*innocently pricking an ear*). D'you hear people say that ?

STROWDE. If he'll take me at your dictation it'll show the Gang, won't it, that you've got a strangle hold on him ? And it'll show you that he feels you've got the Party behind you.

HERIOT (*playfully disapproving*). That's very tortuous.

STROWDE. Tortuous . . . but not very tortuous.

HERIOT (*the statesman again*). Bellingham is a leader to whom I have been consistently loyal . . . and to whom I shall be as consistently loyal as long as he is my leader. Does that imply that I am to sacrifice the interests of the Party rather than . . . put pressure on him ?

STROWDE (*aggravatingly unimpressed*). How soon do you think you'll be strong enough to kick him out ?

HERIOT (*with true dignity*). Strowde . . . I cannot humour your brutality. I am a realist, I hope . . . but matters of this magnitude do surely demand a certain amenity of mind for their discussion.

STROWDE (*all unmoved*). As a detached observer, I've been giving you a couple of years.

HERIOT (*nearing exasperation*). If you think this intellectual ruthlessness of yours is a strength, you're wrong . . . it's a weakness. People don't answer to it . . . and political facts most certainly never answer to it.

STROWDE (*tart*). What the devil, my dear Heriot, is a political fact ?

HERIOT (*placable*). Now, now, don't let's begin generalising. We're men of affairs. As an under-secretary the old man declares he never knew what you'd say next. No wonder he thinks that in the Cabinet you'll be the death of him.

STROWDE. I daresay I should be.

HERIOT (*ignoring that point*). But I tell him we must consider your essential value. You certainly will find him feebler. But after a year or two of the old hard

grind I'm pretty confident you'd find yourself . . . subdued to what you work in.

STROWDE. And with ?

HERIOT. Or with. The potter's hand ! Statesmanship . . . so I phrase it . . . (*and he enjoys phrasing it*) . . . is the art of dealing with men as they most illogically are, and with the time as it nearly always most unfortunately is. We hope for a better . . . we strive for a better. Never let us cease to proclaim that. But the day's work must be done.

Upon which wise maxim he comes to a full close.

STROWDE (*casually*). You're making a fool of yourself over the Trusts.

HERIOT (*who is a keen picker-up of good ideas*). D'you think so ? Why do you think so ?

STROWDE. Your figures are wrong.

HERIOT. They're official figures.

STROWDE. They'll mean nothing two years hence. If the Act makes the business attractive its finance will be swamped . . . and if it doesn't the big companies won't work it . . . then the little ones can't.

Heriot swallows this, somewhat wryly. But, confound it, Strowde is worth having to work with.

HERIOT. Destructive criticism . . . not to be ignored on that account . . . Salomons said something of the sort to me six months ago. But we are faced with the demand for a bill.

STROWDE. It being the business of the legislature to legislate.

HERIOT. God knows I'd be glad to drop it. But

that'd only make room for the emergence of several most awkward questions . . . just as the election's coming on. Well, if nobody works the damned act at least it can't do any harm (*and he throws the business where he so safely throws all business, upon the stream of time*). Where were we ?

STROWDE (*casually*). Do you mind my sister joining the discussion ?

HERIOT. Not at all. (*and glad to re-assert some superiority*) I never make mysteries.

STROWDE (*lifting his voice a trifle*). Eleanor . . . spare us a minute.

HERIOT. And I'm sure Miss Strowde is the soul of discretion.

Eleanor appears again.

ELEANOR. Yes.

STROWDE (*an enigmatic eye on Eleanor*). We two have worked in unison for so long.

Heriot, with a second person—and a woman !—to deal with, becomes very oracular.

HERIOT. Well . . . to write history or to make it . . . that is the question.

ELEANOR (*dryly, finely*). The writing should warn one to be rather more particular in the making, Sir Leslie.

STROWDE (*the unkindness pleasantly masked*). The practical question is . . . could Heriot and I between us get rid of Bellingham the sooner ? I might put that problem to the old gentleman if he sends for me.

HERIOT (*with a gape*). Thank you.

STROWDE. Adding, of course, that you scouted the very idea when I so much as hinted it . . . as you do.

HERIOT. I naturally do.

STROWDE (*hitting clean*). That's your method. It isn't mine. In some things perhaps I'm even less of a mystery-maker than you. Bellingham's sixty-seven. He has poor health. He has been twice Prime Minister. He ought to be able to measure by now the amount of annoyance he can endure. And you don't suppose that when you were putting your sine qua non this idea didn't occur to him.

HERIOT (*brought to something very like sulkiness*). I can't help his suspicious nature.

STROWDE. But if we didn't get rid of him the sooner the intermediate friction would not, on the balance, be profitable to the country. (*Then, venturing rather far in irony*) And we must think of our country, Heriot.

HERIOT. Your humour eludes me.

STROWDE (*infinitely business-like and cheerful*). Then there's a further possible question . . . how long would it take me after to get rid of you ?

To this, however, Heriot rises, happily, like a man.

HERIOT. I bet you a thousand pounds you don't.

STROWDE. I'll bet you a set of my history in half calf to the Premiership that I do.

HERIOT. Let's be serious. Serocold's waiting for me.

STROWDE. You repeat your offer ?

HERIOT. What's your alternative ?

STROWDE. Shall I sit below the gangway and snipe at you ?

HERIOT. You've been getting your eye in lately, I've noticed.

STROWDE. The Chinese meeting? You deserved that.

Recovering his vantage. He is, after all, a Minister of State, and Strowde—— !

HERIOT. Excellent speech. Personally, I'd be grateful to you. Fighting keeps me up to the mark . . . and with a timid public opinion it's the man in office who scores. Look at this present opposition . . . sitting like a row of turnips . . .

STROWDE (*finely*). Or shall I stick to intellectual spade-work?

HERIOT (*who, within his range, be it noted, is anything but a fool*). You won't. You're restless. You'll get back to the House and you won't have enough to do there. You'll grow depressed and dyspeptic and you'll take to making acid interruptions inaudible in the press gallery. You'll find yourself chief of a little group of righteous high-brows in passionate agreement upon abstract principles, without an interest in common and considering themselves insulted if you ask them to vote solid.

STROWDE (*with some genuine admiration*). Now here is a wise man, Eleanor . . . a disillusioned man.

HERIOT (*genuinely pleased with the compliment*). Don't look at me so sternly, Miss Strowde.

ELEANOR. It's an effect of the sunlight on my spectacles, Sir Leslie. Please forgive them!

Heriot's glance goes by chance down the gallery.

HERIOT. Who's this?

STROWDE. Lady Westbury.

HERIOT. Do I know her?

STROWDE. You must have known Mark Westbury.

HERIOT. Oh yes . . . useful fellow . . . Egypt did for him.

So much for Mark. Strowde sticks to his hard jesting.

STROWDE. If you really want to ease matters with Bellingham I should tell him of our bet. The prospect of a fight over the inheritance would amuse him. He wouldn't think the worse of you . . . and he'd like me the better for it.

HERIOT (*ruefully appreciative*). So he would . . . the old scoundrel!

Joan appears.

JOAN. Good morning.

Sir Leslie beamingly descends on her.

HERIOT. How d'you do, Lady Westbury? I fear you don't remember me . . . Leslie Heriot.

JOAN (*with shadowless courtesy*). Yes, indeed. You once gave me tea in your big room in Whitehall after my husband had been waiting for you three hours and a half.

HERIOT (*to encourage her*). Strong Indian tea . . . and you hated it.

JOAN (*poising the words*). Not the tea, I'm sure.

HERIOT. The cake, then . . . office cake!

JOAN (*not having a mallet and chisel handy*). Perhaps it was the cake.

Having made this success, Sir Leslie turns the light of his assurance on Strowde.

HERIOT. When are you coming to town, Strowde?

STROWDE. Wednesday morning.

HERIOT. Lunch with me.

STROWDE. All right.

HERIOT (*benevolent*). Good-bye, Miss Strowde. Forgive me. You'll thank me. Don't think me a cynic. I respect ideals. But I test them . . . as life tests them.

STROWDE (*with a mischievous smile*). My sister really thinks of us both as being about ten years old. I've been a trouble to her, Heriot . . . and her fear is now that I may corrupt your happy faith in life.

HERIOT (*infinitely robust*). Try.

ELEANOR. Nothing would, Sir Leslie, I'm sure.

HERIOT (*in bright innocence*). I do feel young . . . and look at the work I get through.

Serocold's voice is heard from the end of the gallery.

SEROCOLD. Heriot, are you ready ?

HERIOT. Coming.

SEROCOLD. I must be at the office by eleven.

But Strowde grapples him with a voice that has, indeed, more than a little steel in it.

STROWDE. But if we're to be fellow-conspirators, we must agree on a creed.

HERIOT. A programme ?

STROWDE. The father and mother of a programme.

HERIOT. Well ?

STROWDE (*adding, for re-assurance, a touch of humour*). I believe, for instance . . . Heriot, when I've won that bet I'll open Cabinet meetings by having this repeated, all standing . . . I believe that men cease to be fools to become knaves, and that we must govern them by

fear and with lies. They will work under threat of starvation. Greed makes them cunning . . .

SEROCOLD'S VOICE. Evan . . . I shall be late back.

STROWDE. Wait a minute! . . . but desire makes them dangerous. If they rightly remembered yesterday, they wouldn't get out of their beds to-morrow. Sleep's the great ally of the rulers of this world . . . for it rounds each day with oblivion.

Heriot never does quite know when this fellow is serious.

HERIOT. That's a creed I should keep to myself.

STROWDE. That, I know, is the rule. But . . . as between souls of discretion . . . don't you agree?

HERIOT. Seriously, I do not. And I take these things seriously, Strowde . . . or I shouldn't be where I am. I am a democrat . . . with certain reservations. (*He interrupts himself for a benevolent* . . .) Good-bye, Lady Westbury.

JOAN. Good-bye.

Heriot now takes Strowde's arm and starts down the gallery as a ship might leave a bay, with such swelling sails.

HERIOT. I have an almost unbounded faith in the ultimate perfectibility of man. I think that the political, the social, the ethical progress of the centuries are evidence of it. But mind you . . . the freer the democracy the firmer must be the guiding hands. Use force when necessary. And do not expect to find in the masses a grasp of the principles upon which we base our actions. Appeal rather to the heart of the people. . .

The two men disappear. The two women wait, smiles suppressed for a decent thirty seconds.

ELEANOR. Well ?

JOAN (*evenly*). I remember Mark saying after that interview . . . Deliver us from clean-shaven young Ministers, with busts of Napoleon on the mantelpiece. And he has grown vulgar.

ELEANOR. He caricatures himself now. Men of that crude and abounding vitality of mind seldom mature . . . fortunately. When they do they're dangerous. Evan shouldn't poke fun at him so recklessly.

JOAN. Oh . . . by the time the sting penetrates he's thinking of something else.

Strowde returns.

STROWDE. One can't help liking him.

ELEANOR (*very definitely*). I can.

STROWDE. You prefer people all of a moral piece. Our Heriots are stitchings from the rag-bag. There are sound bits in him. After all, we British have had the cutting up of some good minds for this last generation or so. He's not one of God's elect. However, he offers to represent u s. The puzzled human elector finds a bit of his favourite stuff in the patchwork, and says . . . Ah, this is my man. Heriot has courage and good health . . . and he's a success.

ELEANOR. What is his offer worth ?

STROWDE (*unexpectedly*). It was worth while manœuvring him into making it. The next move is Bellingham's. No hurry for mine.

And this seems, in a flash, to release Eleanor from some inhibition. For she speaks as she has not yet spoken.

ELEANOR. Thank you for letting me hear your talk, Evan. I see I can be no more use to you. You're my brother . . . I thought I knew you . . . you've become a stranger to me. I fear there's only one thing I believe in . . . choosing a cause to serve it single-mindedly. When you first took office, after six months you rode open-eyed for a fall. I saw that, if no one else did. I worked at your book with you. Your brains went into it, no doubt. My life went into it. What does it mean to me to feel that if I burned every copy now, you'd hardly shrug your shoulders . . . and to find this task of mine . . . which you've taught me, and thank you . . . this report spattered with your mockeries! I sat up last night crying over it like a child over a copy-book. From to-day, please, let's pretend to be like-minded no more. Turn in your tracks and be the thing you despise. Does it matter? The curse is on you, it seems, of coming at last to despise whatever you do and are. I'm sorry . . . but I must save myself . . . my soul, if you like . . . from despair.

A silence follows, noticeable, though her voice was never lifted. Then Strowde says, as quietly . . .

STROWDE. That's clearly put . . . and quite indisputable.

ELEANOR. Perhaps I shouldn't have said so much before you, Joan. Perhaps I've been right to.

STROWDE. I shall now have to advertise . . . Wanted, a political hostess . . .

He pauses, his sentence unfinished. In the silence Eleanor, unhurriedly, but with neither another word nor a look, gets up and goes out by the turret door.

JOAN. Upright, downright Eleanor!

STROWDE (*as if following out his uninterrupted thought*). Or will you save me a sovereign's worth of Agony column, Joan, and take the job?

She does not answer at once, and when she does, it is as if some other woman, far away, were speaking.

JOAN. No, I can't.

Strowde looks at her; then refuses the words' meaning.

STROWDE. Am I to tell Bellingham and his gang, then, to go to the devil without me? By all means.

JOAN. That's another matter.

STROWDE. Do you mean you won't marry me, Joan?

JOAN. I can't.

Now he must take the meaning, and he does. He allows himself a moment to recover reasonableness.

STROWDE. How long since you made up your mind to say this? You could have given me some sign. I've been taking things too much for granted.

JOAN (*rather helplessly*). I did, too.

STROWDE (*keeping control at the cost of a loosening rein*). What has happened? What have I done? What has changed you?

JOAN (*dully, almost*). I love you still.

STROWDE. Don't say that.

JOAN (*as if she would get to that far-away woman if she could*). But . . . let me be.

STROWDE (*fiercely, even brutally*). So I did ! . . .

JOAN. Like a fool ? You leave that unspoken. (*Then pitifully.*) Do I seem to be cheating you now ?

STROWDE (*recovering reasonableness, kindliness too*). Let's say no more for the moment. I see what's wrong. We mustn't try to live out the fag-end of a difficult past. We must start fresh.

JOAN (*with a little smile*). When the war was at its worst, they say you were at your hopefullest. I see why they want you to work with . . . You'll lose little in losing the last of me.

He sits close by her, friendly, brotherly ; but more.

STROWDE. I want you.

She turns and looks at him, eyes to eyes. But her look is fearful.

JOAN. How did you find your way into the dream that my true life is ? I wish you never had. The selfish soul of me might have died the sooner, left lonely . . . and who'd have been the wiser then ? I could have done my duty to the end . . . married again, even . . . headed a dinner-table . . . not yours, though !

She does her best to make light of the strange trouble ; and he helps her.

STROWDE. Why not mine as well as another ?

JOAN. Should I have liked you if I'd never loved you, I wonder ?

STROWDE. The answer is that you did, you know.

JOAN. And we couldn't let well alone. But you're free of me now . . . I set you free. Oh, this has been a jealous devil, like all barren things.

STROWDE. Barren ?

JOAN (*her voice now echoing all the meaning of the dreadful word*). Ask your heart . . . and your own life ever since . . . God forgive us ! It isn't that one sits idle. I've known how to be kind . . . I've hated evil . . . when I've suffered loss I've suffered indeed. But none of it has truly mattered. My boys . . . yes, a bad blow. And when Eleanor came tip-toeing with the news from Cairo I let grief have its will of me . . . I knew I so safely could . . . and I slipped the more easily out of its clutches back into my dream. And we agreed to be glad, you remember, that I could still care for Mark.

STROWDE. Yes. I said I understood that. I fear I lied to you. I never did.

JOAN. He was very good to me. So would you be. One must live honourably. But all the while I was half ashamed to be giving him what I valued so little. And you want what's left !

STROWDE. My dear, don't despise me for that. I won't lose your love in winning you.

JOAN. But you would.

STROWDE. Why ? Why ever ?

JOAN. We chose to dream. The empty beauty would vanish at a touch.

He sees defeat. But he tries to outflank it.

STROWDE. This is merely morbid, Joan.

JOAN (*responding readily enough to his common sense. This, truly, is what is so hopeless*). Isn't it? Try beating me. I've laughed at myself. I've prayed . . . these past weeks with your eyes on me . . . for some miracle to give birth in me to anything wholly human that I could bring you. (*With a sudden change of front, though.*) I do think that if I could once go quite obliviously to sleep I might wake up different.

STROWDE. I didn't know you weren't sleeping well again.

She turns a little desperate for a moment.

JOAN. Evan, has one to die to sleep? Well, surely then there'll be an end to this terrible constant consciousness of being . . . of purposeless being.

STROWDE. You're not, in your doctor's sense, ailing, are you, except for this? You've seemed so well and so gay.

JOAN. He can't make me sleep . . . and he can't keep me still. I'm one of Nature's pranks, I tell him . . . body and mind, quite conscienceless now, quite irresponsible.

He makes now a new and a different effort.

STROWDE. You'd better marry me, Joan. I'll find you lots to do . . . work you to death by midnight. You shall sleep like a log and wake every morning a different woman. I'll be a perfectly selfish husband, I promise you. Think how a bride will deck my election platform! And you must flatter me, please, with constant affection . . . for my brainwork's too apt to be dry and cruel. And we shall need to go soft a little . . . to be genial. (*But the helpful irony breaks down*

quite.) Oh, my dear love! Oh, my dear . . . my dear!

She is helpless to sustain him.

JOAN. I'd so like to make you happy, too. And Oliver told me last night that he loved me.

STROWDE (*struck*). Why do you suddenly tell me that?

JOAN (*with no further intention*). It's interesting and à propos. He was standing just where you're standing now. Do what you can for the boy. He finds life hard at the moment. Give him a hand.

STROWDE (*gravely deferent*). If you say so.

JOAN. Thank you.

STROWDE. Give me yours.

With an amused smile she lifts it and looks at it rather disparagingly.

JOAN. This?

STROWDE (*as a friend*). Marry me.

JOAN (*taking the privilege offered*). Some other time! Oh, can't we pretend that there'll be some other possible time?

STROWDE. No other but the time one wastes and comes to want.

With baffling swiftness she has changed.

JOAN. And the eternity in which we met.

STROWDE. In which I won you.

JOAN. Yes, Evan . . . truly, utterly.

STROWDE (*violently breaking out*). Don't mock me. There's nothing to separate us . . . and here we stand apart. (*He has not moved her, he has not even recalled her to this their battleground.*) Where are you, Joan . . . where are you?

She shakes her head sadly.

JOAN. Go to work and forget me.

STROWDE (*viciously*). I'd better. Indeed, it has been a barren business . . . you're right.

JOAN. With everything real made bitter to you?

STROWDE. Worse, my dear . . . tasteless. And I've sampled much. Would it help to find things to forgive me?

JOAN (*with a half-smile*). Oh, I've tried that.

STROWDE. Well, well . . . let nothing about me be a reproach to you. If I've only cared to believe the unbelievable and attempt the impossible . . . if that only ends in damnable impotence, what wonder! I lose you.

She is, by this, you would say, a little surprised at her own coldness.

JOAN. Yes, I won't keep you waiting for the miracle.

STROWDE. What sort of creatures are we to set up as spiritual ladies and gentlemen? Strength's in the mud that we're made of. Housekeeping and my career . . . but I'm not clever enough to get you safely tangled in that. I feel like a boy crossed in his first love affair. When we were out on the hill there yesterday, watching that rainbow, I was shaking standing beside you . . . you were so beautiful.

JOAN. The first double-rainbow I'd ever seen . . . except one in a book.

STROWDE. But even that didn't help!

She brings herself back to the world of passing things, but—ironically—it only prompts her to ask . . .

JOAN. What's the time, Evan?

STROWDE. Twenty to ten.

JOAN. I must go and say good-bye to Susan.

He is utterly defeated.

STROWDE. So our lives can't be made to fit . . . and here's an end. We two are evidently not the centre of a divinely appointed system of things.

JOAN. But you don't believe it is.

STROWDE. I've never found worse to say of it! Though if we're to keep some patient pity for our fellow-men, perhaps it's the best faith to hold. What do you mean to do, by the way, if you don't marry me?

JOAN (*frank to herself*). I'm done.

STROWDE. I've energy left. Let's hope that I find nothing new to believe in.

She is by the window, and she draws a long breath as if that might bring her new life; and, in a sense, it seems to.

JOAN. There's a chill in the air. Summer's over . . . its burden's lifting. I'm deeply unhappy to be failing you . . . but I could start off light-heartedly round the world this morning. Would you follow me if I beckoned you . . . a day's march behind?

STROWDE. Yes.

JOAN. No . . . we'll go for a walk down to the lake before lunch . . . and talk politics. I've set you free.

STROWDE. Have you? That may be beyond your power too.

JOAN (*facing him*). But, deep deep down in your heart . . . you never did picture us married and settled, did you?

STROWDE. No . . . I'll confess it.

JOAN. Nor I . . . ever. That is what's so strange . . . and so wrong, I suppose. Forgive me.

STROWDE (*with a smile*). I shall never forgive you . . . for that would be to lose the very last of you, Joan.

JOAN. Twelve o'clock?

STROWDE. Earlier if you like. I've only these letters to see to.

JOAN. I'll try.

She goes down the gallery, lightly, not happily; rather as if happiness were as nothing to her. He sits to his letters. After a moment he finds himself saying . . .

STROWDE. Most merciful God . . . who makest thy creatures to suffer without understanding . .

But he leaves the prayer unfinished and goes on with his letters.

ACT III

SCENE I

At the Strowdes' house in Bedford Square. Evan works habitually in the front room downstairs. It is lined with books. His big writing-table is between the windows; he sits—and is sitting at the moment—with his back to them. On his left, and facing the door, is a smaller table, its chair backing on to the book-cases.

It is a morning in March, and foggy without. Oliver comes in, carrying a time-table and some opened letters. He does not speak, and has time to go to the smaller table and put them down, as well as to glance at a few others left there for him, before Evan says, habitually, and hardly looking up from his own writing . . .

STROWDE. Morning.

OLIVER. Morning, sir.

STROWDE. I thought you'd be late in this fog.

OLIVER. I walked. Will you make up the diary now?

STROWDE. Yes.

Oliver deals with diary and letters and time-table with a chief-of-staff air.

OLIVER. Unless you motor half the night I don't see that you can speak for Hughes at Neath on the twenty-first and at Dover the next afternoon.

STROWDE. Cut Dover. Philpot will lose the seat anyhow.

OLIVER. I'm keeping four free days for emergencies in that fortnight.

STROWDE. Get me the Bible, will you? I want to verify . . . I think it's First Kings, nineteen. I must go to Nottingham. There's a letter. . . .

OLIVER. Yes . . . for the Saturday. And a solid four at Stockton, Tuesday to polling day . . . will that be right?

STROWDE. Ask Duddington.

OLIVER. He has rung up to say he may take the twelve-forty down to-day, and not wait for us.

Oliver, with the Bible taken from its place, walks over to Strowde and at the same time puts a press cutting on his table.

OLIVER. Did you see this?

STROWDE (*giving it half a glance*). The Guardian?

OLIVER. Yes. They're all ducking and dodging over the Trust question.

STROWDE (*without contempt*). Naturally.

OLIVER (*with his chapter found*). What's the quotation?

STROWDE. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers. Very modern and progressive and disillusioned of Elijah! Why ever should he expect to be?

OLIVER. Verse four.

STROWDE. Thank you.

OLIVER. And these to go back in the History file?

"These" are some MSS. piled a few inches high on the table. They might be, and are, the chapters of a book.

STROWDE. Please.

OLIVER. Clumbermere's coming at three, you know.

STROWDE. Yes.

Oliver has noted the wrong entry on the appointment tablet; he now puts down the lump of MS. he has taken up to alter it. At this moment the parlourmaid enters.

MAID. Did you ring, sir?

STROWDE. What time must we leave, Oliver?

OLIVER. The train's four-fifty.

STROWDE. Pack my bag for one night, please. No dress clothes. Tea at four-fifteen. Miss Strowde gone out yet?

MAID. No, sir. She's expecting Miss Kittredge to call for her at eleven.

STROWDE. Will you lunch?

OLIVER. Thank you.

STROWDE. Mr. Gauntlett will lunch.

MAID. Yes, sir.

The maid goes. Strowde has now finished his writing and leans back. Oliver stands beside him.

STROWDE. I doubt if it'll be such a walk over.

OLIVER. For you . . . at Stockton?

STROWDE. The whole election.

OLIVER. Well . . . you like a good fight.

STROWDE (*genially*). You want us whacked. Traitor!

OLIVER. Not more than enough to hurt.

STROWDE. If we were, Bellingham'd throw up the leadership.

OLIVER. Then a year or two's opposition would pay you.

STROWDE. Personally . . . yes . . . with anything worth opposing. How much longer do you mean to stay with me, Oliver ?

OLIVER (*guardedly*). That's still for you to say.

The relation between the two is obviously an easy one as long as it relates to the work they are busy about. Strowde himself, his mind on immediate things, has lost much of his brooding air. But Oliver, it would almost seem, has acquired it.

STROWDE. We must see that the sweets of office don't quite spoil your old appetite for revolution. (*He hands over the sheets of paper he has been busy on*) Put this straight . . . it's the speech for Thursday . . . and type that bit of it in triplicate.

Oliver still has a part of the History MS. in his hand. He holds it and looks at it as if it were something more than typed paper.

OLIVER. Why do you get all this stuff out night after night ?

The question and the action draw them beyond business bounds, and their tone to each other changes. Strowde's, one would say, turns restrainedly affectionate, and Oliver seems to grow sensitive and very watchful.

STROWDE. My derelict past. I've been looking for what I could steal from it. Live stuff . . . almost ! You've read it ?

OLIVER. You said I might.

STROWDE. I wanted you to.

OLIVER. Who else ever has ?

STROWDE. No one. Yes . . . Eleanor typed those three chapters you're holding. The rest . . . no one.

OLIVER (*nodding towards the bookcase where they are*). Why did none of it find a way into the four upstanding volumes ?

STROWDE (*with a smile for the past*). First it was to be for the first, you know . . . and then for the last.

OLIVER. And now there's to be no last.

STROWDE. Do you feel like writing one ?

OLIVER. Whenever a thought was precious to you . . . you hid it away here.

STROWDE. Whenever it was not current coin . . . I laid it by. A queer task . . . bestowing the love of one's mind (*he fingers the lifeless paper at his side*). Scraps of me, too unsure for utterance. As if this flimsiness itself could cohere and live ! Well, I bequeath it to you, Oliver . . . this much of the failure you were so keen to track down. Burn it. It's just worth destroying.

Oliver, however, seems to find more in the matter than this.

OLIVER. But better inherit a failure, I suppose . . . for there's something to be done with it . . . than a success.

STROWDE (*with his kindly smile*). That sounds quite wise. Are you growing patient ?

OLIVER (*a bitter tang in his voice*). I'm turning coward, perhaps.

STROWDE. I doubt it. What has happened ?

OLIVER. I'm lonely.

STROWDE (*with a head-shake*). Why, of course !

OLIVER (*something from deeper down ousting the bitterness*). I meant to live with the dead. I felt I must never forget them. But they're dead to me now. I used to find courage by mustering in the dark that regiment of fellows. . . . I've marched miles with them night after night. One crack regiment, I thought, temptation proof, could make an end of the muddle you've made. And you'd be glad enough when the time came. But the time never comes, you told me. Damnable of you !

STROWDE (*and he means it*). I'm sorry.

But Oliver has evidently learnt how to indulge in the self-destruction of laughter.

OLIVER. Never mind. I'm busy. I'm growing hopeful and helpless and almost good-natured. Don't give me away, though.

STROWDE (*merrily*). Have we begun to impress even you . . . the gang of us . . . with our statesmanlike airs ? Do you thrill at the sight of the red-leather despatch-box with First Lord of the Treasury on it and an Urgent slip sticking out ? You must take a cold chisel to the lock of it the first time it comes to me.

Oliver now does put the papers away, and out of his mind too ; and tackles the forthcoming subject in lively earnest.

OLIVER. But I can't see what's to stop you, Evan, from being thrust to the top of this muddle of minds.

STROWDE. No . . . quite immodestly . . . nor can I.

OLIVER. I watch them sizing you up. They don't like you.

STROWDE. Why should they ?

OLIVER. Why do they trust you, then ?

STROWDE. I'm not altogether one of them . . . and they've lost the habit of trusting each other.

OLIVER. Heriot thought he was making a smart move when he had you handed the hardest job going . . . this Clumbermere business.

STROWDE. Do you think he wants me to fail at it ?

OLIVER (*answering acutely to this test*). No . . . I think he hopes that some sorry moment will give him a chance to wring your hand and say : Well, never mind, old man !

STROWDE (*appreciatively*). Yes, I can hear him.

OLIVER. Mulready wants to quarrel with you.

STROWDE. I can't oblige Mulready.

OLIVER. What, not with one little row, and then kiss and be friends . . . instead of flattering him till he feels a perfect fool ?

STROWDE. He is . . . and if he wasn't kept in mind of it he'd become a nuisance.

OLIVER. You do treat Uncle Stephen as a fellow-creature.

STROWDE. One's fond of Stephen.

Oliver now drops the liveliness a little and puts Strowde on the defensive.

OLIVER. But I sit and watch you thresh out a scheme with some man . . . who's honest and capable at least. How is it he doesn't see that you're mocking him ?

STROWDE (*deprecatory*). No . . . I assure you.

OLIVER. Every letter I write for you . . . it's like laying a snare.

STROWDE (*ironic*). Why . . . am I not theirs very faithfully, their most obedient humble servant? If the schemes will come to nothing in the end, is the mockery mine? What do you expect of me, Oliver?

OLIVER. Poor devils! Each one of them believes in something. If it's not in what he's doing it's in what he hopes to be . . . even if it's only in what he has failed to be. I suppose he expects you to believe a little in him.

STROWDE (*sarcastic*). That's unreasonable. (*But now, in coldest sincerity* . . .) Are you still out to destroy? I'm showing you the sure way. It's to fulfil. The reddest revolutionary is but a part of what he turns against. It's the destiny of a spiritual generation to destroy itself by fulfilling its faith and completing its work . . . and we dignify our passions to this end! Not so pleasant, I grant you, to be doing one's share of the job cold-heartedly and open-eyed. But disbelief's a power . . . and power is satisfying. I lived half my life in the happiness . . . and unhappiness . . . of a vision. One fine day I find that the world I'm living in is nothing like the idea of the world I've been living by. It comes quite casually . . . conversion to disbelief. But you know it's the truth you've found by finding you've always known it . . . known all along that your vision was a vision and no more.

OLIVER. And you leave happiness and unhappiness behind?

STROWDE. You cease to suffer . . . you cease to hope. You have no will to be other than you are.

You are, therefore, extraordinarily efficient. Be something ruthlessly . . . what else counts? . . . and let life become what it will. Watch me succeed, Oliver. That will teach you how to down me in turn. It's the best service I can do you.

Oliver finds but one comment.

OLIVER. Wouldn't you sooner I killed you now where you sit?

STROWDE. That would be rash and well-meaning of you . . . and hardly worth while.

OLIVER (*drawn on now irresistibly*). I came to get what I could from you . . . though you told me to go my own way . . . and I've tried to since. But I've never been able to get free of you, Evan. When I was small you were jolly to me . . . and I liked that. Then I turned against you and wondered why. Odd, how one ignorantly stores up scraps of knowledge about people and things till one can put them together and make out what they mean. Three times, I think, Mother has started to try and tell me about . . . us three. I've managed to stop her . . . for where was the need . . . when, in every sense that counts, I believe I've always known.

Strowde has nothing to say but . . .

STROWDE. Have you? Oh, my dear boy!

OLIVER. Don't . . . don't. We can't begin to be fond of each other.

STROWDE (*half humbly*). No . . . I could never find any way to begin. But lately . . . I've learnt to be rather fond of you. I hope nothing I ever said seemed to give your mother away.

OLIVER (*in a way, the more confident now of the two*). Oh no! Dear Mother and all the other facts of Nature . . . one accepts them and has done with it. There was one fellow at school . . . I never knew of his saying a word . . . but he had some damned story about her inside him, I could see. So I made a row with him . . . though scrapping wasn't the thing . . . and as near killed him as was decent. One can't be her son for nothing.

STROWDE. What makes you tell me now that you know?

OLIVER. I . . . had a feeling you'd like me to.

At this moment the maid comes in, announcing "Mr. Serocold." He is close on her heels.

SEROCOLD. Sorry I'm late.

STROWDE. You'll be later at Number Ten.

SEROCOLD. The P.M. always keeps me waiting. Slack's the word!

STROWDE. Here's what I'm going to say on Thursday. Oliver'll type you a copy.

Serocold, with a nod to his nephew, takes the few sheets of paper.

SEROCOLD. You're seeing Clumbermere?

STROWDE. Three o'clock.

SEROCOLD (*having hit on the passage marked for typing; as he reads*). His people won't like this, will they?

STROWDE (*with a pleasant curtness*). They're not meant to.

SEROCOLD (*as he pulls a face*). I'm very sure Bellingham won't.

STROWDE. He need not, either.

SEROCOLD (*pulling it even longer*). But, my dear fellow, this is a pledge.

STROWDE. Well . . . I'm nobody. I'm not in the government . . . I'm not even in the House yet. If I choose to stake my small reputation that the Trust question will have to be squared inside those lines, what does it matter?

Serocold hands the damned thing back, saying . . .

SEROCOLD. How long will this take you, Oliver?

OLIVER. Three minutes.

Oliver goes off with it.

SEROCOLD (*in deprecatory protest*). Evan . . . you are difficult.

STROWDE (*as one skilled in hitting nails on the head*). I've gruelled at this business, my dear Stephen, till I know its necessities . . . and we'll have to come to their heel.

SEROCOLD (*the ever-comforting phrase*). In time.

STROWDE. And I know Clumbermere. He has got his Bellinghams and Heriots and Stephen Serocolds to deal with too. So I give him a pistol, you see, to put at their heads, and he gives me one to put at yours.

SEROCOLD (*rueful*). Quite so. Set the strong men face to face, and they're back to back before you know where you are.

STROWDE. Thank you!

SEROCOLD. But surely if we must offend our own people we might at least get some support out of Clumbermere's lot for doing so.

STROWDE. Good Lord . . . we don't want their

support! Then Clumbermere would have to start bargaining with us for a great deal more than it's good to give him. He knows that, too.

SEROCOLD. But I've to persuade Number Ten.

STROWDE (*with finality*). Tell Number Ten that if I'm right it's all right . . . and if I'm wrong they'll be rid of me.

The door opens and Eleanor looks in.

ELEANOR. Evan, are you busy?

STROWDE. Yes . . . come in.

ELEANOR. Come in, my dear.

This is to Susan Kittredge, who then follows her. Eleanor shakes hands silently with Stephen.

STROWDE. Good morning, Miss Susan.

ELEANOR. Bad news.

It is indeed written on their faces.

STROWDE. What?

ELEANOR. Joan's very ill.

SEROCOLD. Joan Westbury?

SUSAN. A letter from my grandfather this morning.

SEROCOLD. Is she still out there?

SUSAN. Since Christmas.

ELEANOR. May Evan read it?

SUSAN. Of course.

Susan has the letter in her hand. Strowde takes it without a word.

SEROCOLD. What's the matter with her?

ELEANOR. It's a tumour on the brain.

SEROCOLD. Good God!

SUSAN. Grandfather didn't know for a while that she wasn't sleeping at all. Now she's had a doctor from

Boston that he says he can trust. (*Then to Strowde, who is silently intent on the letter*) I'm afraid it's dreadfully illegible . . . he never types.

SEROCOLD. Aren't they operating?

ELEANOR. They won't. They give her a few weeks.

SEROCOLD. When was that written?

ELEANOR. Ten days ago.

SEROCOLD. Does she know?

ELEANOR. He doesn't say.

SEROCOLD. Poor Joan! I suppose they dose her with morphia.

ELEANOR. Surely!

SEROCOLD. I must go.

After all, what can be done, and what more can be said? Glancing at Strowde, he goes out. Eleanor and Susan talk on in lower tones.

ELEANOR. You've been crying.

SUSAN (*who has been, indeed*). I do all the usual things, I'm afraid.

ELEANOR. Never be afraid, my dear, of doing the usual things.

SUSAN. And she's three thousand miles away.

ELEANOR. What a worry for your grandfather! He's being most kind.

Suddenly Strowde speaks, and they both turn.

STROWDE. This is from Countesbury?

SUSAN. Yes.

He goes back to his reading.

ELEANOR. I thought she was ill in the summer. Why . . . she had planned to go on to Japan, hadn't she, Evan?

SUSAN. Yes. He thinks that the illness . . . her mind . . . they say it makes one very restless.

Serocold looks in again with the paper that Oliver has typed in his hand. He says softly, not so softly as to make sympathy mawkish . . .

SEROCOLD. Good-bye, Eleanor. Let me know when you hear again, please.

ELEANOR. You're dining to-morrow.

SEROCOLD. Oh . . . yes. (*To Susan*) Good-bye.

SUSAN. Good-bye.

He disappears. Stronde's intent stillness—for the letter is long and not easily read—sets up a strain. It is half to relieve it that Susan says . . .

SUSAN. I'll write to-day . . . but it'll miss the mail.

ELEANOR. To Joan ?

SUSAN. I'm sure grandfather would have cabled if she were . . . worse.

ELEANOR. She's dying, my dear.

SUSAN. I know . . . though I don't understand it really.

ELEANOR. That is as it should be.

SUSAN. Why ?

ELEANOR. If we thought often of dying we should soon think of nothing else. Time enough, then, for you.

SUSAN. But . . .

Stronde has finished the letter, has risen, and with a curt " Thank you " he hands it her back and goes out. Eleanor comments on the slight strangeness of this . . .

ELEANOR. Evan had hoped to marry her, you know.

SUSAN. Yes.

ELEANOR. The Election won't leave him much time to be unhappy.

SUSAN. No.

Eleanor's business-like mind will work.

ELEANOR. Twenty past ten, is it?

SUSAN. Just.

ELEANOR. When did you last hear from Joan herself?

SUSAN. Two weeks ago.

ELEANOR. Was she ill then, when she wrote . . . did she say?

SUSAN. No. But that may have been because . . . we were playing a childish game . . . I did once start to tell you . . . pretending we'd changed places. She has my rooms at home . . . they're in a wing by themselves built out over the garden. So she used to write me . . . such good letters . . . and sign them Susan. I was no use at answering. I've kept them all.

Oliver comes in.

OLIVER. Morning. Morning, Susan.

SUSAN. Good morning, Oliver.

He picks up the railway guide from his table and turns the leaves. Later he sits and unlocks a drawer for some money. This seems to break the spell that still held Eleanor slightly, and she says to the girl . . .

ELEANOR. If you wouldn't mind waiting at the Ministry while I see Mr. Pemberton . . . then we could go straight on to Poplar. They'll give us lunch at the factory. I must be back and at Grosvenor Road by two-thirty. I'll get my papers.

SUSAN. Very well.

ELEANOR. This is shocking news, Oliver.

OLIVER. Very.

Eleanor goes. Susan looks across, with a distinct frown, at the taciturn young man.

SUSAN. Don't you care ?

OLIVER. Yes. What good will that do ?

SUSAN. Some good to you.

OLIVER. I wasn't thinking of my own moral improvement for the moment.

SUSAN. Must we quarrel . . . even about this ?

OLIVER (*bitter-sweet*). It's how I show affection for you, Susan.

SUSAN. Thank you. (*But she cannot play up to this sort of thing now, and she bursts out*) I'd give anything to be with her. Oh . . . how horribly casual you all are ! I bring you such news . . . you all say that you loved her . . . you go about your business. . . .

OLIVER. Sentimental Susan !

SUSAN. How is one to learn to like you ? I've tried not to seem a sightseer . . . simply curious about everything. I've tried to forget myself among you and find out what I really cared for. I knew how to love her without wasting time about it, thank goodness. (*And then—common sense catching up with emotion*) Selfish brute . . . that won't save her ! You're right.

Eleanor's voice is heard from the hall, " Ready, Susan."

SUSAN (*repentant for what she thinks is her harsh unreason*). I'm sorry, Oliver.

OLIVER (*armoured and cool*). Why should you like us, my dear Susan ?

Susan, honestly a little hurt, goes without another word. Oliver goes about his business, whatever it is, with an almost suspicious steadiness. After a moment Strowde comes back.

STROWDE. As it happens the boat doesn't sail till three.

OLIVER. The eleven-twenty train will do you, then.

STROWDE. They're keeping me a cabin.

OLIVER. You've four hundred odd in current.

STROWDE. I'll write to Manning for an overdraft. You can cable another five to New York.

Then, with no more emotion than he'd give to the boat or the train or the bank-account . . .

OLIVER. Do you expect to see her alive?

STROWDE. Hardly. I'll give you a line for Duddington.

OLIVER. You might just be back for the polling.

STROWDE. If he thinks he can get my photograph and the gramophone records elected, he's welcome to try. Or you'd make an excellent member. Say to Stephen I'm sorry.

By now Strowde is as busy at his table. The two talk while they work.

OLIVER. Eleanor's just gone out.

STROWDE. Yes.

OLIVER. You won't come back.

STROWDE. That's always possible.

OLIVER. To this conspiracy you won't.

STROWDE. No . . . I don't see yet another welcome from the gang.

OLIVER. Why ever are you going? What's the use?

STROWDE. None.

Oliver gibes. Why does it—but it does—seem to make the whole thing a bit more bearable?

OLIVER. I've been wondering what could happen to save you. You a success! Why . . . the first temptation trips you up.

STROWDE (*suddenly, straight at him*). You'd go.

OLIVER. I can't tell. I'd forgotten her lately. Yes, I'd start swimming there.

STROWDE. Here's the cheque.

OLIVER (*as he takes it*). What about your packing?

STROWDE. Tell them to fill another bag.

OLIVER. Will you cable you're starting?

STROWDE (*after playing with hope for a second*). No.

OLIVER. I'll be back in ten minutes.

He gets to the door, when his father's voice stops him.

STROWDE. Oliver. I'm dumb with you . . . but something that I am you must be too. Forgive me the forgetting it.

To just this much Oliver can and will respond, simply and honestly.

OLIVER. I'm glad I've found you.

STROWDE. I claim no rights in you. But I'm glad.

OLIVER. It's something to go on with.

As he goes, Strowde echoes him as if the words were—they are!—the very last he wanted to feel the meaning of.

STROWDE. To go on with!

SCENE II

We see the corner by the window in Susan's little sitting-room at Countesbury, Massachusetts. It is a white room; and now the snow outside makes it seem whiter still. And the snow brings with it a silence too. Joan, wrapped in shawls, is tucked into an armchair. Mr. Kittredge is sitting by her. Her eyes are closed, she might be dead. When she speaks she does not open them at first. And she never moves, at most a hand reaches out; while he—for he sits by her long hours like this—has fallen almost motionless too.

JOAN. So white! And white now even when I shut my eyes.

MR. KITTREDGE. No pain then?

JOAN. None since this morning, thank you.

MR. KITTREDGE. We are wise children when we fear the dark.

JOAN. Yes . . . now that I don't sleep much at night time, I'm learning how to lose myself in light. What more has dear Susan to say?

MR. KITTREDGE. I had finished the letter.

JOAN. Stupid of me!

MR. KITTREDGE. Did you doze?

JOAN. I slipped out through the window . . . into the snow.

MR. KITTREDGE. Why . . . a step or two further would have taken you into your famous London fog that Susan finds so beautiful.

JOAN (*a flicker of light in her eyes*). I was in London this morning . . . there was no fog . . . it was full of cheerful noise. And yesterday I was in camp again beyond Khartoum . . . watching the little black babies crawl about the sand. I can remember one that died and didn't want to die . . . most of them, you know, come and go as easily . . . and he fought the air with his fists.

MR. KITTREDGE. If memory's a measure of affection, we have given bits of our hearts to the unlikeliest things.

JOAN (*with a smile for him*). Have you ever given your heart . . . all of a piece ?

MR. KITTREDGE (*responsive ; fostering the smile's life, as one might blow, ever so gently, upon a spark*). One tries to. It's the taking coming short is the trouble. Study the money market. That's what sends the values down.

JOAN. Oh, I have let myself be loved . . . most generously. I'm glad that's to my credit.

MR. KITTREDGE. But never given your heart ?

JOAN. One tries to . . . desperately. Probably it's a mistake to try.

MR. KITTREDGE. We can't help trying.

Her thoughts pass like clouds, the light and shade changing in her face.

JOAN. I wonder if I've been a very wicked woman.

MR. KITTREDGE. Probably not . . . if you wonder.

JOAN. I'd have been so content to be nothing but a wife and a mother . . . a link in the chain. In our pedigree book at home there's an Edward Marshall, knight, not so far back, that married . . . two little dashes . . . Eliza. Plain, simple Eliza! Who was she? Scandalous mystery . . . no one wanted to remember! But I've always felt tenderly and dutifully towards my great, great, great . . . and then, after all, one loses count . . . great grandmother Eliza.

For a moment or two they do not speak. Her face turns to the window, and in the white light seems lifeless, quite.

JOAN. Such a bright, silent land! Do you love it as we love England? Not yet. It's harder. It doesn't look back yet and seem to love you . . . as England does.

MR. KITTREDGE. It must take more toll of us first, perhaps.

JOAN. So many generations of the souls and bodies of men to be given to this earth to breed it a soul of its own.

MR. KITTREDGE (*puzzled a little*). Of their souls too?

JOAN. It may have mine and welcome. My old world has a kindly soul . . . with a farm and a church and a house with its garden to show for it. I don't think I want to believe, though, that your quiet spirit must pass into the clatter of cities . . . or is that a music to you with a meaning?

MR. KITTREDGE. With no clear meaning. That's why

I've fallen silent in these last years . . . while I watch the new generations giving themselves to strange tremendous forces to breed . . . what sort of a monster world.

JOAN (*with just one nod of the head*). Yes, I was very scared sailing up the harbour to New York and driving to the station. Those blasphemous towers of Babel weren't a bit like you. But I think you'll come out on top. Yes . . . I have a vision of the sublimer you, conscious, persistent, wise . . . coming out truly on top.

MR. KITTREDGE. Well . . . it may be that a consciousness of purpose is still the greatest power.

Silence falls again. Joan breaks it to a livelier tune. She is happy now, always, when she speaks of her boys.

JOAN. Harry, till he was ten, poor infant, had dreadful headaches . . . and he asked me once, Mother, am I good? So I said he was. Then he asked, need he pray for eternal life? For if it's going to hurt like this, he said, I don't see how I could bear it.

MR. KITTREDGE. I wish I'd known Harry.

JOAN. I wish he'd known you in time. Some of those boys, under the shadow of death, came suddenly to a maturity of mind.

MR. KITTREDGE. This world at least was theirs. What a gift to them!

JOAN (*reproachfully*). You're seldom bitter.

MR. KITTREDGE. Too seldom . . . I dread the vapid benevolence of old age.

JOAN. Better the pain of anger?

MR. KITTREDGE. Life keeps us capable of pain.

JOAN. So uselessly!

MR. KITTREDGE. Not quite. And I think the rough and cunning God of Nature abets our honest passions of love and hate . . . because they never quite cancel out . . . and he profits on the balance. Even as our worldly virtue thrives upon alien sin . . . let us most humbly remember.

JOAN (*her heart bowed*). But barren righteousness there is no god to pardon.

MR. KITTREDGE. None . . . though men have made many.

She looks at him appealingly now.

JOAN. I have that shamefullest sin to confess . . . a sin of being. I have treasured a secret self . . . oh, an ego, if ever there was one.

MR. KITTREDGE (*humouring her thought*). A tyrant?

JOAN. Too aloof and alone for tyranny.

MR. KITTREDGE. Lonely?

JOAN. Never so human.

MR. KITTREDGE. Dear me! What can be done about it?

JOAN (*a strain of torture showing*). It doesn't age, it doesn't suffer . . . and now I've lain awake with it so much I doubt if it ever sleeps. So I have this dread that it's undying.

MR. KITTREDGE (*with a certain dispersive briskness*). I once knew a promising young man possessed of the same devil. He fell in love, had his heart broken . . . broken into. Ego came out to fight and could never quite get back again.

JOAN (*responding with a gleam of merriment*). How vulgar . . . says my secret self, and sniffs. No, I

could never flatter it into being a heart-breaker. It was never half so human. May I confess ?

MR. KITTREDGE. Will my absolution serve ?

JOAN. Give it me of your wisdom and your kindness if you can. (*And there follows her soul's confession.*) Once, in the sheer place of my self's refuge, I found that I was not alone. I turned back to life for safety. We loved the unattainable in each other, so we said . . . and were content to part. When there was no more need for parting we found that it was true. A faith was born to us . . . a dead faith . . . to my shame. And I left him to bear its burden. The world he worked for had much hope of him . . . and need of him.

MR. KITTREDGE. And he failed it ?

JOAN. He let life go. He worked on . . . lifelessly. Better if we had disbelieved.

MR. KITTREDGE. There's no doing that.

JOAN. Rash uplifted souls ! Too proud to pray to the god of the godlike in us to dull our sense and dim our eyes.

MR. KITTREDGE. I do not believe in any such high god.

JOAN (*her mind struggling*). Then why had I no power to bring the faith that kindled to a living birth . . . to set it free . . . that we might serve it ? Nor any will to give it being ? For I hadn't . . . that was the worst. This sacred self that cannot yield to life . . . what is it worth ? Let's only hope the soul's as mortal as the body is.

And now brutal, physical ill takes its advantage of the tortured mind.

MR. KITTREDGE. Your head is hurting you again.

JOAN (*gasping*). Beginning to. Will you please talk to me very sternly?

MR. KITTREDGE. Take my hand.

JOAN. Thank you . . . that's comforting.

She grips his hand tightly. He talks to steady her, to give her moral foothold, if he can.

MR. KITTREDGE. We must be patient . . . with headaches and in the wintertime of our souls. The first discovery, do you know, of my imaginative life was to find a story coming to an unhappy end and to hide the book away with its last chapter still unread. But suddenly that small boy thought: No story ever ends. A very moral anecdote. (*Joan cannot help another gasp.*) Grip my hand hard . . . and I'll grip yours harder.

JOAN. Please.

MR. KITTREDGE. My dear, my dear . . . are there to be no honest failures in this world? Is man's salvation from the brute so small a business that we should each expect a rounded share in it? I've written a book or two on ethics . . . unfinished stories in their kind . . . not so bad though. But maybe what I've best learned how to do by that is to sit here so cleverly . . . confound the pain, we've had three weeks of it . . . and hold your hand.

JOAN. Be stern with me . . . or I can't bear it, I'm afraid.

MR. KITTREDGE. I'm afraid you can. Headache or heartache or a harder thing . . . those that can suffer them must suffer them, it seems. You are the stuff, Joan, that forges well.

There comes into her voice a touch of conquering strength.

JOAN. I am learning a way, I think, through the dark and clamour of this pain. Will you tell him, please, that as the light grows there's always a moment when he's with me . . . till it grows too dazzling.

MR. KITTREDGE. I'll tell him. Ah . . . the grip's loosening. Not such a long bout.

She comes, almost as suddenly, out of the agony. Taking her hand back, she finds it stained.

JOAN. Oh . . . I've cut your hand with my ring.

MR. KITTREDGE (*gallantly*). Good . . . I have shed my blood for you.

JOAN (*with a lady's smile for her knight*). Thank you.

MR. KITTREDGE. Keep the head still now. Set your mind free.

Again a silence falls.

JOAN (*her eyes closed, and, as it would seem, exhaustedly at ease*). Yesterday you told me that three times in your life you had been near to . . . it was a deserter's phrase . . . falling out from the tyrannous procession of the years.

MR. KITTREDGE. Yes . . . three times . . . no more. Good friends, clean enemies, and hard work have kept me happy mostly.

JOAN. What held you in place ?

MR. KITTREDGE. Inconsequent things. Once, it was the thought of an unfinished book that had been paid for. Once, a night's sleep made all the difference. But once my self-respect did seriously protest against a premature indulgence in the ignorance of death.

JOAN. Did the troubles pass ?

MR. KITTREDGE. No. They were unsolved problems. I face them still.

JOAN. To be so hustled in our chains down this road we call time. Then to be hustled off it . . . crippled still . . . into an eternity of empty freedom . . . a mocking threat ! I've taken every happening so easily . . . and I'm at peace about the past. A little tired now, by this pain, and memory plays tricks . . . with real and unreal. That's most immoral, I'm sure.

MR. KITTREDGE. There is an Eastern prayer . . . for those that would leave life behind . . . begins : From the need to know by name or by form . . . deliver me.

JOAN (*with quite a laugh ; a child's laugh*). Oh, I like that ! Anyway, though, my geese were always swans . . . weren't yours ?

MR. KITTREDGE. Are there any fairer swans ?

JOAN (*as if she prayed*). For all denial of what I had to give . . . forgive me. From the soul's empty freedom . . . deliver me. If death cannot make fruitful may it break and end what life could not break nor use.

MR. KITTREDGE (*his voice very hushed*). But we must be patient in understanding too. What gospel is it for the flesh that dies to know it serves a greater end than its own ? Joy of life is its heritage. But man's soul is of man's making. He stumbles and halts in his chosen ways. In the way of vision . . . we see and find small reason to believe. The way of thought brings power . . . but it is power to bind . . . it is law. Whence comes our newer being and its freedom . . . how has life been gained for the soul ? I do not

know. What is to come of it? We're conscious mostly yet of the good life's failure. A bitter business!

JOAN. I've tried to be bitter. So have you. And that's a failure.

Now comes the comfort of his faith. And she listens, as to the absolution she had asked.

MR. KITTREDGE. This I can believe. The generation of the spirit is not as the generation of the flesh . . . for its virtue is diffused like light, generously, unpriced. Doing and suffering and the work of thought must take its toll of us. And all that life corrupts death can destroy. Then we may cease to know. But, freed from self's claim upon it, scattered, dissolved, transformed, that inmost thing we were so impotently may but begin, new breathed, the better to be. For comfort's sake we lead our busy lives. Who wouldn't want to forget sometimes this strange, new, useless burden of the soul? Left comfortless, we must bear it for a while as bravely as we may. (*He is conscious of a change in her. He looks keenly, for perhaps the great change has begun.*) Joan . . . where are you?

JOAN. Not so far.

For a passing moment her face is alert.

MR. KITTREDGE. Why . . . what can you hear now that my chattering ceases?

But impalpably it is veiled.

JOAN. Nothing any more. There's silence now. There's light and silence.

He hardly thinks that she will open her eyes again.

SCENE III

Strowde's study again. Lord Clumbermere is sitting waiting; an old gentleman (though his birth did not formally confer the title) of an ungainly figure and an originally insignificant face, which the sheer practice of life has made characteristic and interesting. He is reading a little leather-bound pocket volume. The Maid opens the door.

THE MAID. Beg pardon, my lord . . . I wasn't sure that neither of them had come in.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. No.

THE MAID (*speaking back to the hall*). Will you wait upstairs, Miss?

SUSAN'S VOICE. I can leave this on the desk . . . or I'll write Mr. Strowde a note.

Whereupon the Maid holds the door wide, and Lord Clumbermere rises with cumbrous politeness as Susan comes in, a cablegram in her hand.

SUSAN. Here? Excuse me.

She goes to Oliver's desk and sits there. The Maid goes. Lord Clumbermere sits down again. Susan, having taken a sheet of paper, decides not to write. Instead, she puts the cablegram

itself into an envelope, which she addresses. Then, looking up, she finds Lord Clumbermere is looking at her.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*in his soft, slow way*). You came with Miss Strowde to see round our Garden City. I showed you round. My name is Clumbermere.

SUSAN (*colourlessly*). Yes. I didn't think you'd remember me.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. You're Miss Susan Kittredge. You come from America

SUSAN. Yes.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. That cablegram's bad news. I'm sorry.

Oliver comes in hurriedly, and as if directly from the street.

OLIVER. You never got my message, my lord! Your City office said they could find you . . . I rang up Grosvenor Square as well . . . and you've been here since three.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*charitably unreproachful*). I have.

OLIVER. I'm very sorry. The message was that Mr. Strowde couldn't keep the appointment with you . . . he is sailing this afternoon on the 'Aquitania.'

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Sudden.

Oliver takes, for the first time, a good look at Susan and sees in her face . . .

OLIVER. Susan . . . what's the matter?

In silence she hands him the envelope.

OLIVER. She's dead?

SUSAN. Yes.

He says, automatically, as he opens it . . .

OLIVER. Please excuse me. (*He reads it, and then for all comment . . .*) This has come through quickly. (*Then turning again to the sympathetically attentive old gentleman*) My uncle thought . . . I've just left him . . . you might like to make some suggestion to avoid bringing your business with Mr. Strowde to a standstill.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I know no more than you tell me, of course . . . but if you now want to telephone to Southampton to stop him, there's a line in my office that can be relied on . . . and it's at your service.

OLIVER (*with a frown*). Thank you. The boat sailed at three.

SUSAN (*striking, involuntarily, almost an eager note*). That might mean four.

OLIVER (*coldly masking some surprise*). It might.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*accommodatingly*). Then the Admiralty wireless will do as well He could land at Cherbourg.

OLIVER (*bringing all this to a full stop*). Yes. You'd rather not see my uncle, of course. His point was that . . . whenever Mr. Strowde did come back the Government's relations to him might have altered.

Lord Clumbermere is pleasantly amused at the senatorial tone; but he keeps his secret.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I catch that point.

OLIVER. And if you think the business pressing . . . ?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I think we had now better let things happen for a little . . . will you tell your good uncle with my compliments? But say I'm always pleased to talk to a man that has a mind of his own and knows it . . . when they find another.

OLIVER. I'll say so. And I'm sure Mr. Strowde would have wished me to say that he was sorry to leave things in the lurch.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*expanding a little, now that Oliver has, apparently, finished patronising him*). Well, you know, from one cause and another . . . accidents and such like . . . that's always occurring. We just can't help thinking this world won't go on without us . . . the evidence is that it will. A little differently? Perhaps. Any worse? That's more doubtful. (*Then rolling round a smile on Susan*) Not that you should feel this way.

SUSAN. Why not?

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*making it into quite a little song*). You're young. I'm old.

SUSAN. If it's all to make so little difference, why do you work fourteen hours a day, Lord Clumbermere?

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*naughtily*). The newspapers say that of me. I don't do more than six hours' real work.

SUSAN (*with friendly persistence*). Why do any?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. It's a habit I've got into. It passes the time . . . keeps me happy . . . and I don't know what else would.

Susan now hesitates a moment; but then, keenly . . .

SUSAN. It isn't my business to ask, I know, but . . . do you want Mr. Strowde to come back?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. In a friendly sense?

SUSAN (*putting it very straight*). Do you think he ought to come back?

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*rather like a benevolent old bear*

whom a rash cub has defied). Dear young lady, that pistol is not loaded. It is not my business to say.

SUSAN (*contrite*). I beg your pardon.

Lord Clumbermere now takes account of the silent Oliver.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Am I keeping you and Miss Kittredge from private conversation?

OLIVER. No, I think not.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. For my next appointment is not till four, and I have only a mile and a quarter to walk to it. This is my day for meeting men on their own ground. If I meet them on mine more than four days a week, I find I grow too obstinate.

Oliver, wrought as he is to-day with suppressed emotions and a tortured mind, can really hardly bear this sententious old gentleman.

OLIVER. Is that a bad business quality?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. It is an unpleasing human quality.

OLIVER. I thought that the set jaw and the thump on the table were the only sure signs of a strong man.

To this juvenile outrage Lord Clumbermere unexpectedly responds with a pathetic and disarming smile.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Don't you like me?

OLIVER (*shamed*). I'm sorry, sir . . . if that sounded rude.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I judged you didn't like me when you came to bring papers to that Amalgamated Plantations meeting last November year . . . which was the first time I saw you.

OLIVER (*recovering superiority*). It must please people amazingly to find out how well you remember them.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*with meek benevolence*). I hope it does. I mean it to. Will you be out of a job now?

OLIVER (*much taken aback*). Well, I've hardly had time to consider. Possibly.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I can offer you one.

OLIVER. A firm offer?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I make no other kind.

What prouder moment for a young man than when—with studied courtesy—he can refuse an offer!

OLIVER. No, thank you, my lord. I've tried the City. I am against you, I fear.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Is that so? And what are you for?

OLIVER. It's not an easy question to answer, you think?

But Oliver is not a pretentious fool; for all that he is sometimes tempted to behave like one.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I think there's only one way to answer it, Mr. Gauntlett . . . and I doubt if you've had time to find that. Miss Kittredge has her eye on this little volume that I carry in my pocket to occupy odd moments. No, it's not a Testament . . . though I carry a Testament sometimes. Nor a Ready Reckoner. Allow me.

He hands it to Susan with a bow.

OLIVER (*who is being won to friendliness*). What is it, Susan?

SUSAN. Everybody's Book of Short Poems.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. They're poor poems mostly, I should suppose. It was the Everybody's caught my fancy just about forty years ago, at Bletchley station, when I was travelling in ink.

OLIVER. Ink for everybody !

LORD CLUMBERMERE. That's what I had to make it if I could.

OLIVER. You did.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*warming comfortably to reminiscence*). Then bottles, pens, paper, typewriters, rubber, lead mines, and a line of steamships. I have prospered, you may say, by giving people what they want . . . and then a little more of what they want . . . and sometimes, maybe, by persuading them to take rather more than they did want. Are you against that ?

OLIVER (*with some severity*). What do you want, my lord ?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Ah . . . that's the riddle . . . and there's a catch in it. There's always a catch in the riddles Life sets us to guess, Mr. Gauntlett. I have had to live to find the answer . . . and I don't say I've found it even yet. Now the poem I happened to be reading when Miss Kittredge came in . . . page sixty-two, I have no literary memory, but I retain numbers . . . is entitled, " I know that my own will come to me." A helpful thought . . . but an awful thought. I never supposed I wanted lots of money . . . but I've got it. I despise titles . . . I'm a lord. I was bred to the Baptist ministry, and I still think I'm a spiritually minded man. And perhaps if I'd been blessed with three children instead of seven, I might be running a

chapel now. You'd say I've sunk my soul . . . not to mention other people's . . . all in money and money's worth. Well, money's a hard master . . . so is success. You think you're all for truth and justice. Right. Come and run my pen factory and find out if that is so.

Oliver sees that this does need an answer.

OLIVER. If I ran your pen factory, I'd be for the pen, the whole pen, and nothing but the pen.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Then you'd be little use to me. If we want a good gold nib, it's religion we must make it with.

OLIVER. I'm sure that sentiment has been applauded on many a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. It has.

OLIVER (*making his attack*). But are you a devil, then, my lord, that you want to beat the souls of men into pen nibs?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I hope not. But if I am, Mr. Gauntlett, please show me the way out of the pit. For I've tried to uplift my fellows . . . gratis; that was a failure . . . at five per cent; that wasn't quite such a failure . . . but it was all a failure really. Odd now! My last turn to with Mr. Strowde was on this very subject, when we crossed with a party on the 'Caronia' to a conference upon the scientific management of Industry in Chicago. (*To Susan*) You're not from Chicago?

SUSAN (*who is very attracted by Lord Clumbermere, though much of her mind is elsewhere*). No, I've never been there. I don't know much of America, I fear.

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*with a bow that a duke might envy*). You are America . . . you don't need to be too self-conscious. I must have done a hundred miles round the decks coming and going, arguing with him. A fine mind. That's eighteen years ago. I was interested in his future.

OLIVER. Did you offer him the pen factory?

LORD CLUMBERMERE (*quite unable to resist this*). Why, Mr. Gauntlett, I wish to make no comparisons . . . but I offered him the rubber and the steamships. And I will again if he wants a job.

SUSAN. One for you, Oliver.

OLIVER (*gallantly*). Yes.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. But he said he had enough to think about.

OLIVER (*joining battle again*). You don't despise sheer thinking.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Why, no. My factories are run by thought.

OLIVER. As well as by faith and honour.

Lord Clumbermere grows a little graver; and he speaks to himself now, as much as to his hearers.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Yes, I'm greedy of all three. And I get greedier. I sometimes wish I didn't . . . but I do. Why should the immortal part of man be all used up making him safe and comfortable? It's humiliating. And even the demand for simple goodness is greater than the supply. My business swallows a lot . . . it could swallow a lot more.

OLIVER (*bitterly*). Then do you wonder there are

people that want to blow you and your factories to smithereens ?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. No, I sympathise. But it isn't practical of them . . . and it wouldn't be popular . . . for where should we all be then ? Subtracting evil doesn't leave good . . . not as I was taught to do sums. So I must seek salvation the other way.

OLIVER. What is that ?

Lord Clumbermere meditatively looks at his watch ; he gets up, and as he speaks, recaptures his little volume.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. On page one hundred and twelve . . . thank you, I wasn't forgetting it . . . there is a poem entitled " It's the little bit extra that counts for God." A good thought. Righteousness is profit, Mr. Gauntlett . . . and before we can have honest profit we must pay our way. I know that is only the creed of a business man. It's half-past three . . . and I'm a slow walker. (*To Susan*). Good afternoon.

SUSAN (*thanks in her eyes*). Could you give me a job ?

LORD CLUMBERMERE. I might.

SUSAN. I may come and ask for one.

LORD CLUMBERMERE. Do. My coat's outside. (*He pauses, to add a little shyly*) I liked to think when I was beginning to do well that my business was, as you might say, the practical side of literature. Great poems must have been written in my ink . . . and treaties have been signed with my pens. So's my hat. (*As he goes out he is saying to Oliver*) Will you tell your uncle then that I think things must be let happen for a little now . . . till we see a chance to interfere again . . .

The door closes on the two of them. But in a moment Oliver returns—to find Susan very ready for him.

SUSAN. Oliver, why wouldn't you telephone? I thought he'd stay talking for ever! Don't you mean to send the wireless?

OLIVER. I don't think so.

SUSAN. Why not? Don't they want him back now?

Oliver can let himself go at last; and, what's more, he can take it out of Susan.

OLIVER. Did they ever want him here? They hated him, they were afraid of him, they're thankful to be rid of him and they're furious he's gone! Poor Uncle Stephen . . . I caught him at Downing Street . . . and his temper for once did run out like a line with a fish at the end of it. You should have heard Henry Chartres over the telephone. Stop and see Eleanor's face when I tell her. Then there's Duddington, his election agent . . . he'll be here soon.

SUSAN (*piercing all this*). But why don't you want him back?

OLIVER (*scornfully*). He threw away a seat in the Cabinet, did he, just to go and cry at her bedside? But now it's too late he's to dodge back thanking God she didn't wait to die till he was well out on the Atlantic. Don't be so materially minded, my dear, even if you are a sentimentalist.

She is stubborn to her point, spiritedly gentle in her insistence on it. He lashes at her from any vantage he can find.

SUSAN. I didn't say I thought it right his going at all. I hadn't an idea he'd gone.

OLIVER. What a wife you'll make some day, Susan, for a successful man!

SUSAN. What's the precise point of that, please?

OLIVER. Spartan but accommodating! Ever ready to indicate the practical ideal.

SUSAN. What's to happen to this world if people won't choose their duty and stick to it though their hearts break?

OLIVER. Yes, you've the patter quite pat. Good girl . . . trailing with your notebook at Eleanor's heels too . . . giving Clumbermere and Co. marks for their interest in Social Welfare. And she's not been looking so glum lately at the wicked party politicians round the lunch table.

SUSAN. She's been glad to see him busy again . . . and happy.

OLIVER. Busy and happy . . . oh, what more is there to be! (*He even takes a turn at what he thinks is a most American phrase*) And isn't it just too wonderful to have the great men that govern the great British Empire feeding off the very next plate!

SUSAN (*who has a temper*). Will you send that wireless?

OLIVER (*his heart speaking at last*). No . . . let him go . . . he was glad to go.

SUSAN. Do you mean to torture him for a week with the doubt if he'll find her alive?

She pressed her advantage quite legitimately, and Oliver owns up.

OLIVER. Ah . . . you have me there. Smart Susan!

SUSAN. Isn't it for him to say now whether he'll come back or not?

OLIVER. Yes. He won't.

SUSAN. I'm sure he will.

He considers this dispassionately, and with a touch of weariness, for he has been at some strain.

OLIVER. There's time enough then. If I go down to the Admiralty I can actually talk to him. I'll take you. You can tell him in a hushed voice . . . not too hushed, and it'll be a bit broken by the buzzing . . . that Joan has . . . passed over, is the pretty phrase, isn't it . . . and will he please come back and forget her.

But, now that she has made her point, Susan may have a fling too.

SUSAN. Oh . . . it's been nothing but an afternoon's delight to you . . . the destruction of his going. Oliver . . . what has maimed you so! I'm sorry . . . I'm very sorry. I forgot your arm.

OLIVER. Maimed in my mind, you mean?

SUSAN (*remorsefully*). Yes.

OLIVER. I daresay.

SUSAN. It's wrong of me to be impatient just because I can't understand you . . . or any of you. But this talk about everything, and nothing said about anything! I think that silly old man was quite right about you, Oliver . . . and you don't know what you want.

OLIVER. There's a worse mischief with most of us, Susan. What we do want doesn't count. We want money and we want peace . . . and we want our own

way. Some of us want things to look beautiful, and some want to be good. And Clumbermere gets rich without knowing why . . . and we statesmen sit puzzling how best to pick his pocket. And you want Evan to come back to the muddle of it all.

SUSAN (*with strait vision*). He belongs here.

OLIVER. If he'd come back . . . he or another . . . and make short work of the lifeless lot of us!

SUSAN. Is there such a thing?

OLIVER. As what?

SUSAN. Short work.

OLIVER (*feeling, all the same, that she is getting the better of him*). Clever child!

SUSAN. Why didn't Joan marry him? They'd have had some happiness at least . . . and that would have helped.

OLIVER (*a last effort*). Why doesn't life plan out into pretty patterns and happy endings? Why isn't it all made easy for you to understand?

SUSAN. Don't mock at me any more, Oliver.

OLIVER. I'm sorry. (*Then, knowing it is truth indeed as he says it*) I only do it because I'm afraid of you.

SUSAN. Nonsense.

He looks at her, half enviously, a little fearfully.

OLIVER. You're so alive.

SUSAN (*fearlessly commonplace*). If she loved him she should have married him.

Oliver shakes his head.

OLIVER. Love isn't all of that sort. Sometimes it brings Judgment Day.

SUSAN. But that's when the dead awake . . . isn't it?

OLIVER. Yes . . . to find this world's done with.

Susan is ready enough to believe there are things involved that she doesn't understand. But she means to understand them. After all, with good will, what can't be understood! Oliver watches her, questioning himself about her, spokes the wheel of her thought occasionally.

SUSAN. I see that he had to go.

OLIVER. He didn't stop to argue it.

SUSAN. But he'll come back . . .

OLIVER. If he does!

SUSAN. When he does . . . different.

OLIVER. Why?

Susan does her best to say; knows, as she says it, how flat and inadequate it must sound.

SUSAN. Loving her so to the last . . . and being cheated . . . is like dying for love. He'll be born again . . . in a way.

OLIVER. You believe in miracles. You would believe in miracles. Simple Susan!

SUSAN (*simply indeed*). Of that sort. Don't you?

OLIVER. No. (*And that ends it. Susan looks dashed, but recovers as quickly. He gets up saying . . .*) I'll go to the Admiralty now.

SUSAN. I'll wait for Eleanor.

OLIVER. Then you'll tell her?

SUSAN (*a smile dawning*). That he's coming back . . . and that she won't know him again?

OLIVER (*grimacing for her benefit*). Poor Evan!

SUSAN. Wouldn't you want to be raised from the dead?

OLIVER. No, indeed.

SUSAN. You'll have to be . . . somehow.

He stops at the door and considers her as she sits there, modest, confident—confident, it would seem merely in an honest mind and her unclouded youth. Then he says . . .

OLIVER. Do you wonder I'm afraid of you, Susan ?

And goes out.

THE END

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